HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE
CITY OF LAS VEGAS
900 S. BRUSH STREET
LAS VEGAS, NV 89107

HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE
CITY OF LAS VEGAS
900 S. BRUSH STREET
LAS VEGAS, NV 89107

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010

http://www.archive.org/details/perilsofpoirot00chri

THE PERILS
OF POIROT

THE PERILS OF POIROT

- *The A.B.C. Murders*
- *The Murder on the Links*
- *Peril at End House*
- *Cat Among the Pigeons*

---

by

Agatha Christie

MYSTERY

Garden City, New York

THE A.B.C. MURDERS
Copyright © 1935, 1936 by Agatha Christie.
Copyright renewed 1951 by Agatha Christie Mallowan.

THE MURDER ON THE LINKS
Copyright © 1923 by Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc.
Copyright renewed 1951 by Agatha Christie Mallowan.

PERIL AT END HOUSE
Copyright © 1931, 1932 by Agatha Christie.
Copyright renewed 1959 by Agatha Christie Mallowan.

CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS
Copyright © 1959 by Agatha Christie Ltd.

This edition by arrangement with G.P. Putnam's Sons.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

CONTENTS

The A.B.C. Murders 1
The Murder on the Links 175
Peril at End House 351
Cat Among the Pigeons 507

CONTENTS

The A.B.C. Murders 1
The Murder on the Links 175
Peril at End House 337
Cat among the Pigeons 507

THE
A.B.C.
MURDERS

FOREWORD

by CAPTAIN ARTHUR HASTINGS, O.B.E.

IN THIS narrative of mine I have departed from my usual practice of relating only those incidents and scenes at which I myself was present. Certain chapters, therefore, are written in the third person.

I wish to assure my readers that I can vouch for the occurrences related in these chapters. If I have taken a certain poetic licence in describing the thoughts and feelings of various persons, it is because I believe I have set them down with a reasonable amount of accuracy. I may add that they have been "vetted" by my friend Hercule Poirot himself.

In conclusion, I will say that if I have described at too great length some of the secondary personal relationships which arose as a consequence of this strange series of crimes, it is because the human and personal element can never be ignored. Hercule Poirot once taught me in a very dramatic manner that romance can be a by-product of crime.

As to the solving of the A.B.C. mystery, I can only say that in my opinion Poirot showed real genius in the way he tackled a problem entirely unlike any which had previously come his way.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

I THE LETTER 7

II (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 12

III ANDOVER 13

IV MRS. ASCHER 18

V MARY DROWER 22

VI THE SCENE OF THE CRIME 27

VII MR. PARTRIDGE AND MR. RIDDELL 34

VIII THE SECOND LETTER 38

IX THE BEXHILL-ON-SEA MURDER 44

X THE BARNARDS 51

XI MEGAN BARNARD 55

XII DONALD FRASER 59

XIII A CONFERENCE 62

XIV THE THIRD LETTER 67

XV SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE 72

XVI (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 79

XVII MARKING TIME 82

XVIII POIROT MAKES A SPEECH 87

XIX BY WAY OF SWEDEN 95

XX LADY CLARKE 98

XXI DESCRIPTION OF A MURDERER 105

XXII (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 110

XXIII SEPTEMBER 11TH. DONCASTER 115

XXIV (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 121

XXV (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 123
XXVI (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 125
XXVII THE DONCASTER MURDER 127
XXVIII (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 132
XXIX AT SCOTLAND YARD 138
XXX (NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE) 141
XXXI HERCULE POIROT ASKS QUESTIONS 143
XXXII AND CATCH A FOX 148
XXXIII ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST 153
XXXIV POIROT EXPLAINS 158
XXXV —— 171

CHAPTER I

THE LETTER

IT WAS in June of 1935 that I came home from my ranch in South America for a stay of about six months. It had been a difficult time for us out there. Like every one else, we had suffered from world depression. I had various affairs to see to in England that I felt could only be successful if a personal touch was introduced. My wife remained to manage the ranch.

I need hardly say that one of my first actions on reaching England was to look up my old friend, Hercule Poirot.

I found him installed in one of the newest type of service flats in London. I accused him (and he admitted the fact) of having chosen this particular building entirely on account of its strictly geometrical appearance and proportions.

"But yes, my friend, it is of a most pleasing symmtery, do you not find it so?"

I said that I thought there could be too much squareness and, alluding to an old joke, I asked if in this super-modern hostelry they managed to induce hens to lay square eggs?

Poirot laughed heartily.

"Ah, you remember that? Alas! no—science has not yet induced the hens to conform to modern tastes, they still lay eggs of different sizes and colours!"

I examined my old friend with an affectionate eye. He was looking wonderfully well—hardly a day older than when I had last seen him.

"You're looking in fine fettle, Poirot," I said. "You've hardly aged at all. In fact, if it were possible, I should say that you had fewer grey hairs than when I saw you last."

Poirot beamed on me.

"And why is that not possible? It is quite true."

"Do you mean your hair is turning from grey to black instead of from black to grey?"

"Precisely."

"But surely that's a scientific impossibility!"

"Not at all."

"But that's very extraordinary. It seems against nature."

"As usual, Hastings, you have the beautiful and unsuspicious mind.

Years do not change that in you! You perceive a fact and mention the solution of it in the same breath without noticing that you are doing so!"

I stared at him puzzled.

Without a word he walked into his bedroom and returned with a bottle in his hand which he handed to me.

I took it, for the moment uncomprehending.

It bore the words:

REVIVIT.—*To bring back the natural tone of the hair.* REVIVIT *is* NOT *a dye. In five shades, Ash, Chestnut, Titian, Brown, Black.*

"Poirot," I cried. "You have dyed your hair!"

"Ah, the comprehension comes to you!"

"So *that's* why your hair looks so much blacker than it did last time I was back."

"Exactly."

"Dear me," I said, recovering from the shock. "I suppose next time I come home I shall find you wearing false moustaches—or are you doing so now?"

Poirot winced. His moustaches had always been his sensitive point. He was inordinately proud of them. My words touched him on the raw.

"No, no, indeed, *mon ami.* That day, I pray the good God, is still far off. The false moustaches! *Quel horreur!"*

He tugged at them vigorously to assure me of their genuine character.

"Well, they are very luxuriant still," I said.

"N'est-ce pas? Never, in the whole of London, have I seen a pair of moustaches to equal mine."

A good job too, I thought privately. But I would not for the world have hurt Poirot's feelings by saying so.

Instead I asked if he still practised his profession on occasions.

"I know," I said, "that you actually retired years ago—"

"C'est vrai. To grow the vegetable marrows! And immediately a murder occurs—and I send the vegetable marrows to promenade themselves to the devil. And since then—I know very well what you will say—I am like the Prima Donna who makes positively the farewell performance! That farewell performance, it repeats itself an indefinite number of times!"

I laughed.

"In truth, it has been very like that. Each time I say: This is the end. But no, something else arises! And I will admit it, my friend, the retirement I care for it not at all. If the little grey cells are not exercised, they grow the rust."

"I see," I said. "You exercise them in moderation."

"Precisely. I pick and choose. For Hercule Poirot nowadays only the cream of crime."

"Has there been much cream about?"

"Pas mal. Not long ago I had a narrow escape."

"Of failure?"

"No, no." Poirot looked shocked. "But I—*I, Hercule Poirot,* was nearly exterminated."

I whistled.

"An enterprising murderer!"

"Not so much enterprising as careless," said Poirot. "Precisely that—careless. But let us not talk of it. You know, Hastings, in many ways I regard you as my mascot."

"Indeed?" I said. "In what ways?"

Poirot did not answer my question directly. He went on:

"As soon as I heard you were coming over I said to myself: Something will arise. As in former days we will hunt together, we two. But if so it must be no common affair. It must be something"—he waved his hands excitedly—"something *recherché*—delicate—*fine* . . ." He gave the last untranslatable word its full flavour.

"Upon my word, Poirot," I said. "Any one would think you were ordering a dinner at the Ritz."

"Whereas one cannot command a crime to order? Very true." He sighed. "But I believe in luck—in destiny, if you will. It is your destiny to stand beside me and prevent me from committing the unforgivable error."

"What do you call the unforgivable error?"

"Overlooking the obvious."

I turned this over in my mind without quite seeing the point.

"Well," I said presently, smiling, "has this super crime turned up yet?"

"Pas encore. At least—that is—"

He paused. A frown of perplexity creased his forehead. His hands automatically straightened an object or two that I had inadvertently pushed awry.

"I am not sure," he said slowly.

There was something so odd about his tone that I looked at him in surprise.

The frown still lingered.

Suddenly with a brief decisive nod of the head he crossed the room to a desk near the window. Its contents, I need hardly say, were all neatly docketed and pigeon-holed so that he was able at once to lay his hand upon the paper he wanted.

He came slowly across to me, an open letter in his hand. He read it through himself, then passed it to me.

"Tell me, *mon ami,"* he said. "What do you make of this?"

I took it from him with some interest.

It was written on thickish white notepaper in printed characters:

> MR. HERCULE POIROT,—You fancy yourself, don't you, at solving mysteries that are too difficult for our poor thick-headed British police? Let us see, Mr. Clever Poirot, just how clever you can be. Perhaps you'll find this nut too hard to crack. Look out for Andover on the 21st of the month.
>
> Yours, etc.,
> A.B.C.

I glanced at the envelope. That also was printed.

"Postmarked W.C.1," said Poirot as I turned my attention to the postmark. "Well, what is your opinion?"

I shrugged my shoulders as I handed it back to him.

"Some madman or other, I suppose."

"That is all you have to say?"

"Well—doesn't it sound like a madman to you?"

"Yes, my friend, it does."

His tone was grave. I looked at him curiously.

"You take this very seriously, Poirot."

"A madman, *mon ami,* is to be taken seriously. A madman is a very dangerous thing."

"Yes, of course, that is true. . . . I hadn't considered that point. . . . But what I meant was, it sounds more like a rather idiotic kind of hoax. Perhaps some convivial idiot who had had one over the eight."

"Comment? Nine? Nine what?"

"Nothing—just an expression. I meant a fellow who was tight. No, damn it, a fellow who had had a spot too much to drink."

"Merci, Hastings—the expression 'tight' I *am* acquainted with it. As you say, there may be nothing more to it than that. . . ."

"But you think there is?" I asked, struck by the dissatisfaction of his tone.

Poirot shook his head doubtfully, but he did not speak.

"What have you done about it?" I inquired.

"What can one do? I showed it to Japp. He was of the same opinion as you—a stupid hoax—that was the expression he used. They get these things every day at Scotland Yard. I, too, have had my share. . . ."

"But you take this one seriously?"

Poirot replied slowly.

"There is something about that letter, Hastings, that I do not like. . . ."

In spite of myself, his tone impressed me.

"You think—what?"

He shook his head, and picking up the letter, put it away again in the desk.

"If you really take it seriously, can't you do something?" I asked.

"As always, the man of action! But what is there to do? The county police have seen the letter but they, too, do not take it seriously. There are no fingerprints on it. There are no local clues as to the possible writer."

"In fact there is only your own instinct?"

"Not instinct, Hastings. Instinct is a bad word. It is my *knowledge*—my *experience*—that tells me that something about that letter is wrong—"

He gesticulated as words failed him, then shook his head again.

"I may be making the mountain out of the anthill. In any case there is nothing to be done but wait."

"Well, the 21st is Friday. If a whacking great robbery takes place near Andover then—"

"Ah, what a comfort that would be—!"

"A *comfort?"* I stared. The word seemed to be a very extraordinary one to use.

"A robbery may be a *thrill* but it can hardly be a comfort!" I protested.

Poirot shook his head energetically.

"You are in error, my friend. You do not understand my meaning. A robbery would be a relief since it would dispossess my mind of the fear of something else."

"Of what?"

"Murder," said Hercule Poirot.

CHAPTER II

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

MR. ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST rose from his seat and peered near-sightedly round the shabby bedroom. His back was stiff from sitting in a cramped position and as he stretched himself to his full height an onlooker would have realized that he was, in reality, quite a tall man. His stoop and his near-sighted peering gave a delusive impression.

Going to a well-worn overcoat hanging on the back of the door, he took from the pocket a packet of cheap cigarettes and some matches. He lit a cigarette and then returned to the table at which he had been sitting. He picked up a railway guide and consulted it, then he returned to the consideration of a typewritten list of names. With a pen, he made a tick against one of the first names on the list.

It was Thursday, June 20th.

CHAPTER III

ANDOVER

I HAD been impressed at the time by Poirot's forebodings about the anonymous letter he had received, but I must admit that the matter had passed from my mind when the 21st actually arrived and the first reminder of it came with a visit paid to my friend by Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. The C. I. D. inspector had been known to us for many years and he gave me a hearty welcome.

"Well, I never," he exclaimed. "If it isn't Captain Hastings back from the wilds of the what do you call it! Quite like old days seeing you here with Monsieur Poirot. You're looking well, too. Just a little bit thin on top, eh? Well, that's what we're all coming to. I'm the same."

I winced slightly. I was under the impression that owing to the careful way I brushed my hair across the top of my head that thinness referred to by Japp was quite unnoticeable. However, Japp had never been remarkable for tact where I was concerned, so I put a good face upon it and agreed that we were none of us getting any younger.

"Except Monsieur Poirot here," said Japp. "Quite a good advertisement for a hair tonic, he'd be. Face fungus sprouting finer than ever. Coming out into the limelight, too, in his old age. Mixed up in all the celebrated cases of the day. Train mysteries, air mysteries, high society deaths—oh, he's here, there and everywhere. Never been so celebrated as since he retired."

"I have already told Hastings that I am like the Prima Donna who makes always one more appearance," said Poirot, smiling.

"Shouldn't wonder if you ended by detecting your own death," said Japp, laughing heartily. "That's an idea, that is. Ought to be put in a book."

"It will be Hastings who will have to do that," said Poirot, twinkling at me.

"Ha ha! That would be a joke, that would," laughed Japp.

I failed to see why the idea was so extremely amusing, and in any case I thought the joke was in poor taste. Poirot, poor old chap, is getting on. Jokes about his approaching demise can hardly be agreeable to him.

Perhaps my manner showed my feelings, for Japp changed the subject.

"Have you heard about Monsieur Poirot's anonymous letter?" he asked.

"I showed it to Hastings the other day," said my friend.

"Of course," I exclaimed. "It had quite slipped my memory. Let me see, what was the date mentioned?"

"The 21st," said Japp. "That's what I dropped in about. Yesterday was the 21st and just out of curiosity I rang up Andover last night. It was a hoax all right. Nothing doing. One broken shop window—kid throwing stones—and a couple of drunk and disorderlies. So just for once our Belgian friend was barking up the wrong tree."

"I am relieved, I must confess," acknowledged Poirot.

"You'd quite got the wind up about it, hadn't you?" said Japp affectionately. "Bless you, we get dozens of letters like that coming in every day! People with nothing better to do and a bit weak in the top story sit down and write 'em. They don't mean any harm! Just a kind of excitement."

"I have indeed been foolish to take the matter so seriously," said Poirot. "It is the nest of the horse that I put my nose into there."

"You're mixing up mares and wasps," said Japp.

"Pardon?"

"Just a couple of proverbs. Well, I must be off. Got a little business in the next street to see to—receiving stolen jewellry. I thought I'd just drop in on my way and put your mind at rest. Pity to let those grey cells function unnecessarily."

With which words and a hearty laugh, Japp departed.

"He does not change much, the good Japp, eh?" asked Poirot.

"He looks much older," I said. "Getting as grey as a badger," I added vindictively.

Poirot coughed and said:

"You know, Hastings, there is a little device—my hairdresser is a man of great ingenuity—one attaches it to the scalp and brushes one's own hair over it—it is not a wig, you comprehend—but—"

"Poirot," I roared. "Once and for all I will have nothing to do with the beastly inventions of your confounded hairdresser. What's the matter with the top of my head?"

"Nothing—nothing at all."

"It's not as though I were going *bald.*"

"Of course not! Of course not!"

"The hot summers out there naturally cause the hair to fall out a bit. I shall take back a really good hair tonic."

"Précisément."

"And, anyway, what business is it of Japp's? He always was an offensive kind of devil. And no sense of humour. The kind of man who laughs when a chair is pulled away just as a man is about to sit down."

"A great many people would laugh at that."

"It's utterly senseless."

"From the point of view of the man about to sit, certainly it is."

"Well," I said, slightly recovering my temper. (I admit that I am touchy about the thinness of my hair.) "I'm sorry that anonymous letter business came to nothing."

"I have indeed been in the wrong over that. About that letter, there was, I thought, the odour of the fish. Instead a mere stupidity. Alas, I grow old and suspicious like the blind watch-dog who growls when there is nothing there."

"If I'm going to co-operate with you, we must look about for some other 'creamy' crime," I said with a laugh.

"You remember your remark of the other day? If you could order a crime as one orders a dinner, what would you choose?"

I fell in with his humour.

"Let me see now. Let's review the menu. Robbery? Forgery? No, I think not. Rather too vegetarian. It must be murder—red-blooded murder—with trimmings, of course."

"Naturally. The *hors d'oeuvres.*"

"Who shall the victim be—man or woman? Man, I think. Some bigwig. American millionaire. Prime Minister. Newspaper proprietor. Scene of the crime—well, what's wrong with the good old library? Nothing like it for atmosphere. As for the weapon—well, it might be a curiously twisted dagger—or some blunt instrument—a carved stone idol—"

Poirot sighed.

"Or, of course," I said, "there's poison—but that's always so technical. Or a revolver shot echoing in the night. Then there must be a beautiful girl or two—"

"With auburn hair," murmured my friend.

"Your same old joke. One of the beautiful girls, of course, must be unjustly suspected—and there's some misunderstanding between her and the young man. And then, of course, there must be some other suspects—an older woman—dark, dangerous type—and some friend or rival of the dead man's—and a quiet secretary—dark horse—and a hearty man with a bluff manner—and a couple of discharged servants or gamekeepers or something—and a damn fool of a detective rather like Japp—and well—that's about all."

"That is your idea of the cream, eh?"

"I gather you don't agree."

Poirot looked at me sadly.

"You have made there a very pretty résumé of nearly all the detective stories that have ever been written."

"Well," I said. "What would *you* order?"

Poirot closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. His voice came purringly from between his lips.

"A very simple crime. A crime with no complications. A crime of quiet domestic life . . . very unimpassioned—very *intime.*"

"How can a crime be *intime?*"

"Supposing," murmured Poirot, "that four people sit down to play bridge and one, the odd man out, sits in a chair by the fire. At the end of the evening the man by the fire is found dead. One of the four, while he is dummy, has gone over and killed him, and, intent on the play of the hand, the other three have not noticed. Ah, there would be a crime for you! *Which of the four was it?*"

"Well," I said. "I can't see *any* excitement in that!"

Poirot threw me a glance of reproof.

"No, because there are no curiously twisted daggers, no blackmail, no emerald that is the stolen eye of a god, no untraceable Eastern poisons. You have the melodramatic soul, Hastings. You would like, not one murder, but a series of murders."

"I admit," I said, "that a second murder in a book often cheers things up. If the murder happens in the first chapter, and you have to follow up everybody's alibi until the last page but one—well, it does get a bit tedious."

The telephone rang and Poirot rose to answer.

" 'Allo," he said. " 'Allo. Yes, it is Hercule Poirot speaking."

He listened for a minute or two and then I saw his face change.

His own side of the conversation was short and disjointed.

"*Mais oui* . . ."

"Yes, of course . . ."

"But yes, we will come . . ."

"Naturally . . ."

"It may be as you say . . ."

"Yes, I will bring it. *A tout à l'heure* then."

He replaced the receiver and came across the room to me.

"That was Japp speaking, Hastings."

"Yes?"

"He had just got back to the Yard. There was a message from Andover. . . ."

"Andover?" I cried excitedly.

Poirot said slowly:

"An old woman of the name of Ascher who keeps a little tobacco and newspaper shop has been found murdered."

I think I felt ever so slightly damped. My interest, quickened by the sound of Andover, suffered a faint check. I had expected something fantastic—out of the way! The murder of an old woman who kept a little tobacco shop seemed, somehow, sordid and uninteresting.

Poirot continued in the same slow, grave voice:

"The Andover police believe they can put their hand on the man who did it—"

I felt a second throb of disappointment.

"It seems the woman was on bad terms with her husband. He drinks and is by way of being rather a nasty customer. He's threatened to take her life more than once.

"Nevertheless," continued Poirot, "in view of what has happened, the police there would like to have another look at the anonymous letter I received. I have said that you and I will go down to Andover at once."

My spirits revived a little. After all, sordid as this crime seemed to be, it was a *crime,* and it was a long time since I had had any association with crime and criminals.

I hardly listened to the next words Poirot said. But they were to come back to me with significance later.

"This is the beginning," said Hercule Poirot.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. ASCHER

WE WERE received at Andover by Inspector Glen, a tall, fair-haired man with a pleasant smile.

For the sake of conciseness I think I had better give a brief résumé of the bare facts of the case.

The crime was discovered by Police Constable Dover at 1 A.M. on the morning of the 22nd. When on his round he tried the door of the shop and found it unfastened. He entered and at first thought the place was empty. Directing his torch over the counter, however, he caught sight of the huddled up body of the old woman. When the police surgeon arrived on the spot it was elicited that the woman had been struck down by a heavy blow on the back of the head, probably while she was reaching down a packet of cigarettes from the shelf behind the counter. Death must have occurred about nine to seven hours previously.

"But we've been able to get it down a bit nearer than that," explained the inspector. "We've found a man who went in and bought some tobacco at 5.30. And a second man went in and found the shop empty, as he thought, at five minutes past six. That puts the time at between 5.30 and 6.05. So far I haven't been able to find any one who saw this man Ascher in the neighbourhood, but, of course, it's early as yet. He was in the Three Crowns at nine o'clock pretty far gone in drink. When we get hold of him he'll be detained on suspicion."

"Not a very desirable character, inspector?" asked Poirot.

"Unpleasant bit of goods."

"He didn't live with his wife?"

"No, they separated some years ago. Ascher's a German. He was a waiter at one time, but he took to drink and gradually became unemployable. His wife went into service for a bit. Her last place was as cook-housekeeper to an old lady, Miss Rose. She allowed her husband so much out of her wages to keep himself, but he was always getting drunk and coming round and making scenes at the places where she was employed. That's why she took the post with Miss Rose at The Grange. It's three miles out of Andover, dead in the country. He couldn't get at her there so well. When Miss Rose died, she left Mrs. Ascher a small legacy, and the woman started this tobacco and newsagent business—quite a tiny place—

just cheap cigarettes and a few newspapers—that sort of thing. She just about managed to keep going. Ascher used to come round and abuse her now and again and she used to give him a bit to get rid of him. She allowed him fifteen shillings a week regular."

"Had they any children?" asked Poirot.

"No. There's a niece. She's in service near Overton. Very superior, steady young woman."

"And you say this man Ascher used to threaten his wife?"

"That's right. He was a terror when he was in drink—cursing and swearing that he'd bash her head in. She had a hard time, did Mrs. Ascher."

"What age of woman was she?"

"Close on sixty—respectable and hard-working."

Poirot said gravely:

"It is your opinion, inspector, that this man Ascher committed the crime?"

The inspector coughed cautiously.

"It's a bit early to say that, Mr. Poirot, but I'd like to hear Franz Ascher's own account of how he spent yesterday evening. If he can give a satisfactory account of himself, well and good—if not—"

His pause was a pregnant one.

"Nothing was missing from the shop?"

"Nothing. Money in the till quite undisturbed. No signs of robbery."

"You think that this man Ascher came into the shop drunk, started abusing his wife and finally struck her down?"

"It seems the most likely solution. But I must confess, sir, I'd like to have another look at that very odd letter you received. I was wondering if it was just possible that it came from this man Ascher."

Poirot handed over the letter and the inspector read it with a frown.

"It doesn't read like Ascher," he said at last. "I doubt if Ascher would use the term 'our' British police—not unless he was trying to be extra cunning—and I doubt if he's got the wits for that. Then the man's a wreck—all to pieces. His hand's too shaky to print letters clearly like this. It's good quality notepaper and ink, too. It's odd that the letter should mention the 21st of the month. Of course it *might* be a coincidence."

"That is possible—yes."

"But I don't like this kind of coincidence, Mr. Poirot. It's a bit too pat."

He was silent for a minute or two—a frown creasing his forehead.

"A.B.C. Who the devil could A.B.C. be? We'll see if Mary Drower (that's the niece) can give us any help. It's an odd business. But for this letter I'd have put my money on Franz Ascher for a certainty."

"Do you know anything of Mrs. Ascher's past?"

"She's a Hampshire woman. Went into service as a girl up in London—that's where she met Ascher and married him. Things must have been difficult for them during the war. She actually left him for good in 1922. They were in London then. She came back here to get away from him, but he got wind of where she was and followed her down here, pestering her for money—" A constable came in. "Yes, Briggs, what is it?"

"It's the man Ascher, sir. We've brought him in."

"Right. Bring him in here. Where was he?"

"Hiding in a truck on the railway siding."

"He was, was he? Bring him along."

Franz Ascher was indeed a miserable and unprepossessing specimen. He was blubbering and cringing and blustering alternately. His bleary eyes moved shiftily from one face to another.

"What do you want with me? I have not done nothing. It is a shame and a scandal to bring me here! You are swine, how dare you?" His manner changed suddenly. "No, no, I do not mean that—you would not hurt a poor old man—not be hard on him. Every one is hard on poor old Franz. Poor old Franz."

Mr. Ascher started to weep.

"That'll do, Ascher," said the inspector. "Pull yourself together. I'm not charging you with anything—yet. And you're not bound to make a statement unless you like. On the other hand, if you're *not* concerned in the murder of your wife—"

Ascher interrupted him—his voice rising to a scream.

"I did not kill her! I did not kill her! It is all lies! You are goddamned English pigs—all against me. I never kill her—never."

"You threatened to often enough, Ascher."

"No, no. You do not understand. That was just a joke—a good joke between me and Alice. She understood."

"Funny kind of joke! Do you care to say where you were yesterday evening, Ascher?"

"Yes, yes—I tell you everything. I did not go near Alice. I am with friends—good friends. We are at the Seven Stars—and then we are at the Red Dog—"

He hurried on, his words tumbling over each other.

"Dick Willows—he was with me—and old Curdie—and George—and Platt and lots of the boys. I tell you I do not never go near Alice. *Ach Gott*, it is the truth I am telling you."

His voice rose to a scream. The inspector nodded to his underling.

"Take him away. Detained on suspicion."

"I don't know what to think," he said as the unpleasant, shaking old man with the malevolent, mouthing jaw was removed. "If it wasn't for the letter, I'd say he did it."

"What about the men he mentions?"

"A bad crowd—not one of them would stick at perjury. I've no doubt he *was* with them the greater part of the evening. A lot depends on whether any one saw him near the shop between half-past five and six."

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

"You are sure nothing was taken from the shop?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "That depends. A packet or two of cigarettes might have been taken—but you'd hardly commit murder for that."

"And there was nothing—how shall I put it—introduced into the shop. Nothing that was odd there—incongruous?"

"There was a railway guide," said the inspector.

"A railway guide?"

"Yes. It was open and turned face downward on the counter. Looked as though some one had been looking up the trains from Andover. Either the old woman or a customer."

"Did she sell that type of thing?"

The inspector shook his head.

"She sold penny time-tables. This was a big one—kind of thing only Smith's or a big stationer would keep."

A light came into Poirot's eyes. He leant forward.

"A railway guide, you say. A Bradshaw—*or an A.B.C.?"*

A light came into the inspector's eye also.

"By the Lord," he said. "It *was* an A.B.C."

CHAPTER V

MARY DROWER

I THINK that I can date my interest in the case from that first mention of the A.B.C. railway guide. Up till then I had not been able to raise much enthusiasm. This sordid murder of an old woman in a back street shop was so like the usual type of crime reported in the newspapers that it failed to strike a significant note. In my own mind I had put down the anonymous letter with its mention of the 21st as a mere coincidence. Mrs. Ascher, I felt reasonably sure, had been the victim of her drunken brute of a husband. But now the mention of the railway guide (so familiarly known by its abbreviation of A.B.C., listing as it did all railway stations in their alphabetical order) sent a quiver of excitement through me. Surely—surely this could not be a second coincidence?

The sordid crime took on a new aspect.

Who was the mysterious individual who had killed Mrs. Ascher and left an A.B.C. railway guide behind him?

When we left the police station our first visit was to the mortuary to see the body of the dead woman. A strange feeling came over me as I gazed down on that wrinkled old face with the scanty grey hair drawn back tightly from the temples. It looked so peaceful, so incredibly remote from violence.

"Never knew who or what struck her," observed the sergeant. "That's what Dr. Kerr says. I'm glad it was that way, poor old soul. A decent woman she was."

"She must have been beautiful once," said Poirot.

"Really?" I murmured incredulously.

"But yes, look at the line of the jaw, the bones, the moulding of the head."

He sighed as he replaced the sheet and we left the mortuary.

Our next move was a brief interview with the police surgeon.

Dr. Kerr was a competent-looking middle-aged man. He spoke briskly and with decision.

"The weapon wasn't found," he said. "Impossible to say what it may have been. A weighted stick, a club, a form of sandbag—any of those would fit the case."

"Would much force be needed to strike such a blow?"

The doctor shot a keen glance at Poirot.

"Meaning, I suppose, could a shaky old man of seventy do it? Oh, yes, it's perfectly possible—given sufficient weight in the head of the weapon, quite a feeble person could achieve the desired result."

"Then the murderer could just as well be a woman as a man?"

The suggestion took the doctor somewhat aback.

"A woman, eh? Well, I confess it never occurred to me to connect a woman with this type of crime. But of course it's possible—perfectly possible. Only, psychologically speaking, I shouldn't say this was a woman's crime."

Poirot nodded his head in eager agreement.

"Perfectly, perfectly. On the face of it, highly improbable. But one must take all possibilities into account. The body was lying—how?"

The doctor gave us a careful description of the position of the victim. It was his opinion that she had been standing with her back to the counter (and therefore to her assailant) when the blow had been struck. She had slipped down in a heap behind the counter quite of sight of any one entering the shop casually.

When we had thanked Dr. Kerr and taken our leave, Poirot said:

"You perceive, Hastings, that we have already one further point in favour of Ascher's innocence. If he had been abusing his wife and threatening her, she would have been *facing* him over the counter. Instead, she had her *back* to her assailant—obviously she is reaching down tobacco or cigarettes for a *customer.*"

I gave a little shiver.

"Pretty gruesome."

Poirot shook his head gravely.

"Pauvre femme," he murmured.

Then he glanced at his watch.

"Overton is not, I think, many miles from here. Shall we run over there and have an interview with the niece of the dead woman?"

"Surely you will go first to the shop where the crime took place?"

"I prefer to do that later. I have a reason."

He did not explain further, and a few minutes later we were driving on the London road in the direction of Overton.

The address which the inspector had given us was that of a good-sized house about a mile on the London side of the village.

Our ring at the bell was answered by a pretty dark-haired girl whose eyes were red with recent weeping.

Poirot said gently:

"Ah! I think it is you who are Miss Mary Drower, the parlourmaid here?"

"Yes, sir, that's right. I'm Mary, sir."

"Then perhaps I can talk to you for a few minutes if your mistress will not object. It is about your aunt, Mrs. Ascher."

"The mistress is out, sir. She wouldn't mind, I'm sure, if you came in here."

She opened the door of a small morning-room. We entered and Poirot, seating himself on a chair by the window, looked up keenly into the girl's face.

"You have heard of your aunt's death, of course?"

The girl nodded, tears coming once more into her eyes.

"This morning, sir. The police came over. Oh! it's terrible! Poor auntie! Such a hard life as she'd had, too. And now this—it's too awful."

"The police did not suggest your returning to Andover?"

"They said I must come to the inquest—that's on Monday, sir. But I've nowhere to go there—I couldn't fancy being over the shop—now—and what with the housemaid being away, I didn't want to put the mistress out more than may be."

"You were fond of your aunt, Mary?" said Poirot gently.

"Indeed I was, sir. Very good she's been to me always, auntie has. I went to her in London when I was eleven years old, after mother died. I started in service when I was sixteen, but I usually went along to auntie's on my day out. A lot of trouble she went through with that German fellow. 'My old devil', she used to call him. He'd never let her be in peace anywhere. Sponging, cadging old beast."

The girl spoke with vehemence.

"Your aunt never thought of freeing herself by legal means from this persecution?"

"Well, you see, he was her husband, sir, you couldn't get away from that."

The girl spoke simply but with finality.

"Tell me, Mary, he threatened her, did he not?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it was awful the things he used to say. That he'd cut her throat, and such like. Cursing and swearing too—both in German and in English. And yet auntie says he was a fine handsome figure of a man when she married him. It's dreadful to think, sir, what people come to."

"Yes, indeed. And so, I suppose, Mary, having actually heard these threats, you were not so very surprised when you learnt what had happened?"

"Oh, but I was, sir. You see, sir, I never thought for one moment that he meant it. I thought it was just nasty talk and nothing more to it. And it isn't as though auntie was afraid of him. Why, I've seen him slink away like a dog with its tail between its legs when she turned on him. *He* was afraid of *her* if you like."

"And yet she gave him money?"

"Well, he was her husband, you see, sir."

"Yes, so you said before." He paused for a minute or two. Then he said: "Suppose that, after all, he did *not* kill her."

"Didn't kill her?"

She stared.

"That is what I said. Supposing some one else killed her. . . . Have you any idea who that some one else could be?"

She stared at him with even more amazement.

"I've no idea, sir. It doesn't seem likely, though, does it?"

"There was no one your aunt was afraid of?"

Mary shook her head.

"Auntie wasn't afraid of people. She'd a sharp tongue and she'd stand up to anybody."

"You never heard her mention any one who had a grudge against her?"

"No, indeed, sir."

"Did she ever get anonymous letters?"

"What kind of letters did you say, sir?"

"Letters that weren't signed—or only signed by something like A.B.C." He watched her narrowly, but plainly she was at a loss. She shook her head wonderingly.

"Has your aunt any relations except you?"

"Not now, sir. One of ten she was, but only three lived to grow up. My Uncle Tom was killed in the war, and my Uncle Harry went to South America and no one's heard of him since, and mother's dead, of course, so there's only me."

"Had your aunt any savings? Any money put by?"

"She'd a little in the Savings Bank, sir—enough to bury her proper, that's what she always said. Otherwise she didn't more than just make ends meet—what with her old devil and all."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He said—perhaps more to himself than to her:

"At present one is in the dark—there is no direction—if things get clearer—" He got up. "If I want you at any time, Mary, I will write to you here."

"As a matter of fact, sir, I'm giving in my notice. I don't like the country. I stayed here because I fancied it was a comfort to auntie to have me near by. But now"—again the tears rose in her eyes—"there's no reason I should stay, and so I'll go back to London. It's gayer for a girl there."

"I wish that, when you do go, you would give me your address. Here is my card."

He handed it to her. She looked at it with a puzzled frown.

"Then you're not—anything to do with the police, sir?"

"I am a private detective."

She stood there looking at him for some moments in silence.

She said at last:

"Is there anything—queer going on, sir?"

"Yes, my child. There is—something queer going on. Later you may be able to help me."

"I—I'll do anything, sir. It—it wasn't *right,* sir, auntie being killed."

A strange way of putting it—but deeply moving.

A few seconds later we were driving back to Andover.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

THE STREET in which the tragedy had occurred was a turning off the main street. Mrs. Ascher's shop was situated about half-way down it on the right-hand side.

As we turned into the street Poirot glanced at his watch and I realized why he had delayed his visit to the scene of the crime until now. It was just on half-past five. He had wished to reproduce yesterday's atmosphere as closely as possible.

But if that had been his purpose it was defeated. Certainly at this moment the road bore very little likeness to its appearance on the previous evening. There were a certain number of small shops interspersed between private houses of the poorer class. I judged that ordinarily there would be a fair number of people passing up and down—mostly people of the poorer classes, with a good sprinkling of children playing on the pavements and in the road.

At this moment there was a solid mass of people standing staring at one particular house or shop and it took little perspicuity to guess which that was. What we saw was a mass of average human beings looking with intense interest at the spot where another human being had been done to death.

As we drew nearer this proved to be indeed the case. In front of a small dingy-looking shop with its shutters now closed stood a harassed-looking young policeman who was stolidly adjuring the crowd to "pass along there." By the help of a colleague, displacements took place—a certain number of people grudgingly sighed and betook themselves to their ordinary vocations, and almost immediately other persons came along and took up their stand to gaze their full on the spot where murder had been committed.

Poirot stopped a little distance from the main body of the crowd. From where we stood the legend painted over the door could be read plainly enough. Poirot repeated it under his breath.

"A. Ascher. *Oui, c'est peut-être la—*"

He broke off.

"Come, let us go inside, Hastings."

I was only too ready.

We made our way through the crowd and accosted the young policeman. Poirot produced the credentials which the inspector had given him. The constable nodded, and unlocked the door to let us pass within. We did so and entered to the intense interest of the lookers-on.

Inside it was very dark owing to the shutters being closed. The constable found and switched on the electric light. The bulb was a low-powered one so that the interior was still dimly lit.

I looked about me.

A dingy little place. A few cheap magazines strewn about, and yesterday's newspapers—all with a day's dust on them. Behind the counter a row of shelves reaching to the ceiling and packed with tobacco and packets of cigarettes. There were also a couple of jars of peppermint humbugs and barley sugar. A commonplace little shop, one of many thousand such others.

The constable in his slow Hampshire voice was explaining the *mise en scène.*

"Down in a heap behind the counter, that's where she was. Doctor says as how she never knew what hit her. Must have been reaching up to one of the shelves."

"There was nothing in her hand?"

"No, sir, but there was a packet of Players down beside her."

Poirot nodded. His eyes swept round the small space observing—noting.

"And the railway guide was—where?"

"Here, sir." The constable pointed out the spot on the counter. "It was open at the right page for Andover and lying face down. Seems as though he must have been looking up the trains to London. If so, 'twasn't an Andover man at all. But then, of course, the railway guide might have belonged to some one else what had nothing to do with the murder at all, but just forgot it here."

"Fingerprints?" I suggested.

The man shook his head.

"The whole place was examined straight away, sir. There weren't none."

"Not on the counter itself?" asked Poirot.

"A long sight too many, sir! All confused and jumbled up."

"Any of Ascher's among them?"

"Too soon to say, sir."

Poirot nodded, then asked if the dead woman lived over the shop.

"Yes, sir, you go through that door at the back, sir. You'll excuse me coming with you, but I've got to stay—"

Poirot passed through the door in question and I followed him. Behind the shop was a microscopic sort of parlour and kitchen combined—it was neat and clean but very dreary-looking and scantily furnished. On the mantelpiece were a few photographs. I went up and looked at them and Poirot joined me.

The photographs were three in all. One was a cheap portrait of the girl we had been with that afternoon, Mary Drower. She was obviously wearing her best clothes and had the self-conscious, wooden smile on her face that so often disfigures the expression in posed photography, and makes a snapshot preferable.

The second was a more expensive type of picture—an artistically blurred reproduction of an elderly woman with white hair. A high fur collar stood up round the neck.

I guessed that this was probably the Miss Rose who had left Mrs. Ascher the small legacy which had enabled her to start in business.

The third photograph was a very old one, now faded and yellow. It represented a young man and woman in somewhat old-fashioned clothes standing arm in arm. The man had a button-hole and there was an air of bygone festivity about the whole pose.

"Probably a wedding picture," said Poirot. "Regard, Hastings, did I not tell you that she had been a beautiful woman?"

He was right. Disfigured by old-fashioned hair-dressing and weird clothes, there was no disguising the handsomeness of the girl in the picture with her clear-cut features and spirited bearing. I looked closely at the second figure. It was almost impossible to recognize the seedy Ascher in this smart young man with the military bearing.

I recalled the leering drunken old man, and the worn, toil-worn face of the dead woman—and I shivered a little at the remorselessness of time. . . .

From the parlour a stair led to two upstairs rooms. One was empty and unfurnished, the other had evidently been the dead woman's bedroom. After being searched by the police it had been left as it was. A couple of old worn blankets on the bed—a little stock of well-darned underwear in a drawer—cookery recipes in another—a paper-backed novel entitled *The Green Oasis*—a pair of new stockings—pathetic in their cheap shininess—a couple of china ornaments—a Dresden shepherd much broken, and a blue and yellow spotted dog—a black raincoat and a woolly jumper hanging on pegs—such were the worldly possessions of the late Alice Ascher.

If there had been any personal papers, the police had taken them.

"Pauvre femme," murmured Poirot. "Come, Hastings, there is nothing for us here."

When we were once more in the street, he hesitated for a minute or two, then crossed the road. Almost exactly opposite Mrs. Ascher's was a greengrocer's shop—of the type that has most of its stock outside rather than inside.

In a low voice Poirot gave me certain instructions. Then he himself entered the shop. After waiting a minute or two I followed him in. He was at the moment negotiating for a lettuce. I myself bought a pound of strawberries.

Poirot was talking animatedly to the stout lady who was serving him.

"It was just opposite you, was it not, that this murder occurred? What an affair! What a sensation it must have caused you!"

The stout lady was obviously tired of talking about the murder. She must have had a long day of it. She observed:

"It would be as well if some of that gaping crowd cleared off. What is there to look at, I'd like to know?"

"It must have been very different last night," said Poirot. "Possibly you even observed the murderer enter the shop—a tall, fair man with a beard, was he not? A Russian, so I have heard."

"What's that?" The woman looked up sharply. "A Russian did it, you say?"

"I understand that the police have arrested him."

"Did you ever now?" The woman was excited, voluble. "A foreigner."

"Mais oui. I thought perhaps you might have noticed him last night?"

"Well, I don't get much chance of noticing, and that's a fact. The evening's our busy time and there's always a fair few passing along and getting home after their work. A tall, fair man with a beard—no, I can't say I saw any one of that description anywhere about."

I broke in on my cue.

"Excuse me, sir," I said to Poirot. "I think you have been misinformed. A short *dark* man I was told."

An interested discussion intervened in which the stout lady, her lank husband and a hoarse-voiced shop-boy all participated. No less than four short dark men had been observed, and the hoarse boy had seen a tall fair one, "but he hadn't got no beard," he added regretfully.

Finally, our purchases made, we left the establishment, leaving our falsehoods uncorrected.

"And what was the point of all that, Poirot?" I demanded somewhat reproachfully.

"Parbleu, I wanted to estimate the chances of a stranger being noticed entering the shop opposite."

"Couldn't you simply have asked—without all that tissue of lies?"

"No, *mon ami.* If I had 'simply asked,' as you put it, I should have got no answer at all to my questions. You yourself are English and yet you do not seem to appreciate the quality of the English reaction to a direct question. It is invariably one of suspicion and the natural result is reticence. If I had asked those people for information they would have shut up like oysters. But by making a statement (and a somewhat out of the way and preposterous one) and by your contradiction of it, tongues are immediately loosened. We know also that that particular time was a 'busy time' —that is, that every one would be intent on their own concerns and that there would be a fair number of people passing along the pavements. Our murderer chose his time well, Hastings."

He paused and then added on a deep note of reproach:

"Is it that you have not in any degree the common sense, Hastings? I say to you: 'Make a purchase *quelconque'*—and you deliberately choose the strawberries! Already they commence to creep through their bag and endanger your good suit."

With some dismay, I perceived that this was indeed the case.

I hastily presented the strawberries to a small boy who seemed highly astonished and faintly suspicious.

Poirot added the lettuce, thus setting the seal on the child's bewilderment.

He continued to drive the moral home.

"At a cheap greengrocer's—*not* strawberries. A strawberry, unless fresh picked, is bound to exude juice. A banana—some apples—even a cabbage —but *strawberries*—"

"It was the first thing I thought of," I explained by way of excuse.

"That is unworthy of your imagination," returned Poirot sternly.

He paused on the sidewalk.

The house and shop on the right of Mrs. Ascher's was empty. A "To Let" sign appeared in the windows. On the other side was a house with somewhat grimy muslin curtains.

To this house Poirot betook himself and, there being no bell, executed a series of sharp flourishes with the knocker.

The door was opened after some delay by a very dirty child with a nose that needed attending to.

"Good-evening," said Poirot. "Is your mother within?"

"Ay?" said the child.

It stared at us with disfavour and deep suspicion.

"Your mother," said Poirot.

This took some twelve seconds to sink in, then the child turned and, bawling up the stairs, "Mum, you're wanted," retreated to some fastness in the dim interior.

A sharp-faced woman looked over the balusters and began to descend.

"No good you wasting your time—" she began, but Poirot interrupted her.

He took off his hat and bowed magnificently.

"Good-evening, madame. I am on the staff of the *Evening Flicker.* I want to persuade you to accept a fee of five pounds and let us have an article on your late neighbour, Mrs. Ascher."

The irate words arrested on her lips, the woman came down the stairs smoothing her hair and hitching at her skirt.

"Come inside, please—on the left there. Won't you sit down, sir."

The tiny room was heavily over-crowded with a massive pseudo-Jacobean suite, but we managed to squeeze ourselves in and on to a hard-seated sofa.

"You must excuse me," the woman was saying. "I am sure I'm sorry I spoke so sharp just now, but you'd hardly believe the worry one has to put up with—fellows coming along selling this, that and the other—vacuum cleaners, stockings, lavender bags and such like foolery—and all so plausible and civil spoken. Got your name, too, pat they have. It's Mrs. Fowler this, that and the other."

Seizing adroitly on the name, Poirot said:

"Well, Mrs. Fowler, I hope you're going to do what I ask."

"I don't know, I'm sure." The five pounds hung alluringly before Mrs. Fowler's eyes. "I *knew* Mrs. Ascher, of course, but as to *writing* anything."

Hastily Poirot reassured her. No labour on her part was required. He would elicit the facts from her and the interview would be written up.

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Fowler plunged willingly into reminiscence, conjecture and hearsay.

Kept to herself, Mrs. Ascher had. Not what you'd call really *friendly,* but there, she'd had a lot of trouble, poor soul, every one knew that. And by rights Franz Ascher ought to have been locked up years ago. Not that Mrs. Ascher had been afraid of him—a real tartar she could be when roused! Give as good as she got any day. But there it was—the pitcher could go to the well once too often. Again and again, she, Mrs. Fowler, had said to her: "One of these days that man will do for you. Mark my words." And he had done, hadn't he? And there had she, Mrs. Fowler, been right next door and never heard a sound.

In a pause Poirot managed to insert a question.

Had Mrs. Ascher ever received any peculiar letters—letters without a proper signature—just something like A.B.C.?

Regretfully, Mrs. Fowler returned a negative answer.

"I know the kind of thing you mean—anonymous letters they call them—mostly full of words you'd blush to say out loud. Well, I don't know, I'm sure, if Franz Ascher ever took to writing those. Mrs. Ascher never let on to me if he did. What's that? A railway guide, an A.B.C.? No, I never saw such a thing about—and I'm sure if Mrs. Ascher had been sent one I'd have heard about it. I declare you could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard about this whole business. It was my girl Edie what came to me. 'Mum,' she says, 'there's ever so many policemen next door.' Gave me quite a turn, it did. 'Well,' I said, when I heard about it, 'it does show that she ought never to have been alone in the house—that niece of hers ought to have been with her. A man in drink can be like a ravening wolf,' I said, 'and in my opinion a wild beast is neither more nor less than what that old devil of a husband of hers is. I've warned her,' I said, 'many times and now my words have come true. He'll do for you,' I said. And he has done for her! You can't rightly estimate what a man will do when he's in drink and this murder's a proof of it."

She wound up with a deep gasp.

"Nobody saw this man Ascher go into the shop, I believe?" said Poirot.

Mrs. Fowler sniffed scornfully.

"Naturally he wasn't going to show himself," she said.

How Mr. Ascher had got there without showing himself she did not deign to explain.

She agreed that there was no back way into the house and that Ascher was quite well known by sight in the district.

"But he didn't want to swing for it and he kept himself well hid."

Poirot kept the conversational ball rolling some little time longer but when it seemed certain that Mrs. Fowler had told all that she knew not once but many times over, he terminated the interview, first paying out the promised sum.

"Rather a dear five pounds' worth, Poirot," I ventured to remark when we were once more in the street.

"So far, yes."

"You think she knows more than she has told?"

"My friend, we are in the peculiar position of *not knowing what questions to ask.* We are like little children playing *Cache Cache* in the dark. We stretch out our hands and grope about. Mrs. Fowler has told us all that she *thinks* she knows—and has thrown in several conjectures for good measure! In the future, however, her evidence may be useful. It is for the future that I have invested that sum of five pounds."

I did not quite understand the point, but at this moment we ran into Inspector Glen.

CHAPTER VII

MR. PARTRIDGE AND MR. RIDDELL

INSPECTOR GLEN was looking rather gloomy. He had, I gathered, spent the afternoon trying to get a complete list of persons who had been noticed entering the tobacco shop.

"And nobody has seen any one?" Poirot inquired.

"Oh, yes, they have. Three tall men with furtive expressions—four short men with black moustaches—two beards—three fat men—all strangers—and all, if I'm to believe witnesses, with sinister expressions! I wonder somebody didn't see a gang of masked men with revolvers while they were about it!"

Poirot smiled sympathetically.

"Does anybody claim to have seen the man Ascher?"

"No, they don't. And that's another point in his favour. I've just told the Chief Constable that I think this is a job for Scotland Yard. I don't believe it's a local crime."

Poirot said gravely:

"I agree with you."

The inspector said:

"You know, Monsieur Poirot, it's a nasty business—a nasty business . . . I don't like it. . . ."

We had two more interviews before returning to London.

The first was with Mr. James Partridge. Mr. Partridge was the last person known to have seen Mrs. Ascher alive. He had made a purchase from her at 5.30.

Mr. Partridge was a small, spare man, a bank clerk by profession. He wore pince-nez, was very dry and spare-looking and extremely precise in all his utterances. He lived in a small house as neat and trim as himself.

"Mr.—er—Poirot," he said, glancing at the card my friend had handed to him. "From Inspector Glen? What can I do for you, Mr. Poirot?"

"I understand, Mr. Partridge, that you were the last person to see Mrs. Ascher alive."

Mr. Partridge placed his finger-tips together and looked at Poirot as though he were a doubtful cheque.

"That is a very debatable point, Mr. Poirot," he said. "Many people may have made purchases from Mrs. Ascher after I did so."

"If so, they have not come forward to say so."

Mr. Partridge coughed.

"Some people, Mr. Poirot, have no sense of public duty."

He looked at us owlishly through his spectacles.

"Exceedingly true," murmured Poirot. "You, I understand, went to the police of your own accord?"

"Certainly I did. As soon as I heard of the shocking occurrence I perceived that my statement might be helpful and came forward accordingly."

"A very proper spirit," said Poirot solemnly. "Perhaps you will be so kind as to repeat your story to me."

"By all means. I was returning to this house and at 5.30 precisely—"

"Pardon, how was it that you knew the time so accurately?"

Mr. Partridge looked a little annoyed at being interrupted.

"The church clock chimed. I looked at my watch and found I was a minute slow. That was just before I entered Mrs. Ascher's shop."

"Were you in the habit of making purchases there?"

"Fairly frequently. It was on my way home. About once or twice a week I was in the habit of purchasing two ounces of John Cotton mild."

"Did you know Mrs. Ascher at all? Anything of her circumstances or her history?"

"Nothing whatever. Beyond my purchase and an occasional remark as to the state of the weather, I had never spoken to her."

"Did you know she had a drunken husband who was in the habit of threatening her life?"

"No, I knew nothing whatever about her."

"You knew her by sight, however. Did anything about her appearance strike you as unusual yesterday evening? Did she appear flurried or put out in any way?"

Mr. Partridge considered.

"As far as I noticed, she seemed exactly as usual," he said.

Poirot rose.

"Thank you, Mr. Partridge, for answering these questions. Have you, by any chance, an A.B.C. in the house? I want to look up my return train to London."

"On the shelf just behind you," said Mr. Partridge.

On the shelf in question were an A.B.C., a Bradshaw, the Stock Exchange Year Book, Kelly's Directory, a Who's Who and a local directory.

Poirot took down the A.B.C., pretended to look up a train, then thanked Mr. Partridge and took his leave.

Our next interview was with Mr. Albert Riddell and was of a highly different character. Mr. Albert Riddell was a platelayer and our conversation took place to the accompaniment of the clattering of plates and dishes by Mr. Riddell's obviously nervous wife, the growling of Mr. Riddell's dog and the undisguised hostility of Mr. Riddell himself.

He was a big clumsy giant of a man with a broad face and small suspicious eyes. He was in the act of eating meat-pie, washed down by exceedingly black tea. He peered at us angrily over the rim of his cup.

"Told all I've got to tell once, haven't I?" he growled. "What's it to do with me, anyway? Told it to the blarsted police, I 'ave, and now I've got to spit it all out again to a couple of blarsted foreigners."

Poirot gave a quick, amused glance in my direction and then said:

"In truth I sympathize with you, but what will you? It is a question of murder, is it not? One has to be very, very careful."

"Best tell the gentleman what he wants, Bert," said the woman nervously.

"You shut your blarsted mouth," roared the giant.

"You did not, I think, go to the police of your own accord." Poirot slipped the remark in neatly.

"Why the hell should I? It were no business of mine."

"A matter of opinion," said Poirot indifferently. "There has been a murder—the police want to know who has been in the shop—I myself think it would have—what shall I say?—looked more natural if you had come forward."

"I've got my work to do. Don't say I shouldn't have come forward in my own time—"

"But as it was, the police were given your name as that of a person seen to go into Mrs. Ascher's and they had to come to you. Were they satisfied with your account?"

"Why shouldn't they be?" demanded Bert truculently.

Poirot merely shrugged his shoulders.

"What are you getting at, mister? Nobody's got anything against me? Every one knows who did the old girl in, that b—— of a husband of hers."

"But he was not in the street that evening and you were."

"Trying to fasten it on me, are you? Well, you won't succeed. What reason had I got to do a thing like that? Think I wanted to pinch a tin of her bloody tobacco? Think I'm a bloody homicidal maniac as they call it? Think I—?"

He rose threateningly from his seat. His wife bleated out:

"Bert, Bert—don't say such things. Bert—they'll think—"

"Calm yourself, Monsieur," said Poirot. "I demand only your account of your visit. That you refuse it seems to me—what shall we say—a little odd?"

"Who said I refused anything?" Mr. Riddell sank back again into his seat. "I don't mind."

"It was six o'clock when you entered the shop?"

"That's right—a minute or two after, as a matter of fact. Wanted a packet of Gold Flake. I pushed open the door—"

"It was closed, then?"

"That's right. I thought shop was shut, maybe. But it wasn't. I went in, there wasn't any one about. I hammered on the counter and waited a bit. Nobody came, so I went out again. That's all, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it."

"You didn't see the body fallen down behind the counter?"

"No, no more would you have done—unless you was looking for it, maybe."

"Was there a railway guide lying about?"

"Yes, there was—face downwards. It crossed my mind like that the old woman might have had to go off sudden by train and forgot to lock shop up."

"Perhaps you picked up the railway guide or moved it along the counter?"

"Didn't touch the b—— thing. I did just what I said."

"And you did not see any one leaving the shop before you yourself got there?"

"Didn't see any such thing. What I say is, why pitch on me—?"

Poirot rose.

"Nobody is pitching upon you—yet. *Bon soir,* Monsieur."

He left the man with his mouth open and I followed him.

In the street he consulted his watch.

"With great haste, my friend, we might manage to catch the 7.02. Let us despatch ourselves quickly."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND LETTER

"WELL?" I demanded eagerly.

We were seated in a first-class carriage which we had to ourselves. The train, an express, had just drawn out of Andover.

"The crime," said Poirot, "was committed by a man of medium height with red hair and a cast in the left eye. He limps slightly on the right foot and has a mole just below the shoulder-blade."

"Poirot?" I cried.

For the moment I was completely taken in. Then the twinkle in my friend's eye undeceived me.

"Poirot!" I said again, this time in reproach.

"Mon ami, what will you? You fix upon me a look of doglike devotion and demand of me a pronouncement a la Sherlock Holmes! Now for the truth—*I do not know what the murderer looks like, nor where he lives, nor how to set hands upon him."*

"If only he had left some clue," I murmured.

"Yes, the clue—it is always the clue that attracts you. Alas that he did not smoke the cigarette and leave the ash, and then step in it with a shoe that has nails of a curious pattern. No—he is not so obliging. But at least, my friend, you have the *railway guide.* The A.B.C., that is a clue for you!"

"Do you think he left it by mistake then?"

"Of course not. He left it on purpose. The fingerprints tell us that."

"But there weren't any on it."

"That is what I mean. What was yesterday evening? A warm June night. Does a man stroll about on such an evening in *gloves?* Such a man would certainly have attracted attention. Therefore since there are no fingerprints on the A.B.C., it must have been carefully wiped. An innocent man would have left prints—a guilty man would not. So our murderer left it there for a purpose—but for all that it is none the less a clue. That A.B.C. was bought by some one—it was carried by some one—there is a possibility there."

"You think we may learn something that way?"

"Frankly, Hastings, I am not particularly hopeful. This man, this unknown X, obviously prides himself on his abilities. He is not likely to blaze a trail that can be followed straight away."

"So that really the A.B.C. isn't helpful at all."

"Not in the sense you mean."

"In any sense?"

Poirot did not answer at once. Then he said slowly:

"The answer to that is yes. We are confronted here by an unknown personage. He is in the dark and seeks to remain in the dark. But in the very nature of things *he cannot help throwing light upon himself.* In one sense we know nothing about him—in another sense we know already a good deal. I see his figure dimly taking shape—a man who prints clearly and well—who buys good-quality paper—who is at great needs to express his personality. I see him as a child possibly ignored and passed over—I see him growing up with an inward sense of inferiority—warring with a sense of injustice. . . . I see that inner urge—to assert himself—to focus attention on himself ever becoming stronger, and events, circumstances—crushing it down—heaping, perhaps, more humiliations on him. And inwardly the match is set to the powder train. . . ."

"That's all pure conjecture," I objected. "It doesn't give you any practical help."

"You prefer the match end, the cigarette ash, the nailed boots! You always have. But at least we can ask ourselves some practical questions. Why the A.B.C.? Why Mrs. Ascher? Why Andover?"

"The woman's past life seems simple enough," I mused. "The interviews with those two men were disappointing. They couldn't tell us anything more than we knew already."

"To tell the truth, I did not expect much in that line. But we could not neglect two possible candidates for the murder."

"Surely you don't think—"

"There is at least a possibility that the murderer lives in or near Andover. That is a possible answer to our question: 'Why Andover?' Well, here were two men known to have been in the shop at the requisite time of day. Either of them *might* be the murderer. And there is nothing as yet to show that one or other of them is *not* the murderer."

"That great hulking brute, Riddell, perhaps," I admitted.

"Oh, I am inclined to acquit Riddell off-hand. He was nervous, blustering, obviously uneasy—"

"But surely that just shows—"

"A nature diametrically opposed to that which penned the A.B.C. letter. Conceit and self-confidence are the characteristics that we must look for."

"Some one who throws his weight about?"

"Possibly. But some people, under a nervous and self-effacing manner, conceal a great deal of vanity and self-satisfaction."

"You don't think that little Mr. Partridge—?"

"He is more *le type.* One cannot say more than that. He acts as the writer of the letter would act—goes at once to the police—pushes himself to the fore—enjoys his position."

"Do you really think—?"

"No, Hastings. Personally I believe that the murderer came from outside Andover, but we must neglect no avenue of research. And although I say 'he' all the time, we must not exclude the possibility of a woman being concerned."

"Surely not!"

"The method of attack is that of a man, I agree. But anonymous letters are written by women rather than by men. We must bear that in mind."

I was silent for a few minutes, then I said:

"What do we do next?"

"My energetic Hastings," Poirot said and smiled at me.

"No, but what do we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" My disappointment rang out clearly.

"Am I the magician? The sorcerer? What would you have me do?"

Turning the matter over in my mind I found it difficult to give an answer. Nevertheless I felt convinced that something ought to be done and that we should not allow the grass to grow under our feet.

I said:

"There is the A.B.C.—and the notepaper and envelope—"

"Naturally everything is being done in that line. The police have all the means at their disposal for that kind of inquiry. If anything is to be discovered on those lines have no fear but that they will discover it."

With that I was forced to rest content.

In the days that followed I found Poirot curiously disinclined to discuss the case. When I tried to reopen the subject he waved it aside with an impatient hand.

In my own mind I was afraid that I fathomed his motive. Over the murder of Mrs. Ascher, Poirot had sustained a defeat. A.B.C. had challenged him—and A.B.C. had won. My friend, accustomed to an unbroken line of successes, was sensitive to his failure—so much so that he could not even endure discussion of the subject. It was, perhaps, a sign of pettiness in so great a man, but even the most sober of us is liable to have his head turned by success. In Poirot's case the head-turning process had been going on for years. Small wonder if its effects became noticeable at long last.

Understanding, I respected my friend's weakness and I made no further reference to the case. I read in the paper the account of the inquest. It was very brief, no mention was made of the A.B.C. letter, and a verdict was returned of murder by some person or persons unknown. The crime attracted very little attention in the press. It had no popular or spectacular features. The murder of an old woman in a side street was soon passed over in the press for more thrilling topics.

Truth to tell, the affair was fading from my mind also, partly, I think, because I disliked to think of Poirot as being in any way associated with a failure, when on July 25th it was suddenly revived.

I had not seen Poirot for a couple of days as I had been away in Yorkshire for the week-end. I arrived back on Monday afternoon and the letter came by the six o'clock post. I remember the sudden, sharp intake of breath that Poirot gave as he slit open that particular envelope.

"It has come," he said.

I stared at him—not understanding.

"What has come?"

"The second chapter of the A.B.C. business."

For a minute I looked at him uncomprehendingly. The matter had really passed from my memory.

"Read," said Poirot and passed me over the letter.

As before, it was printed on good-quality paper.

DEAR MR. POIROT,—Well, what about it? First game to me, I think. The Andover business went with a swing, didn't it?

But the fun's only just beginning. Let me draw your attention to Bexhill-on-Sea. Date, the 25th inst.

What a merry time we are having!

Yours, etc.,
A.B.C.

"Good God, Poirot," I cried. "Does this mean that this fiend is going to attempt another crime?"

"Naturally, Hastings. What else did you expect? Did you think that the Andover business was an isolated case? Do you not remember my saying: 'This is the beginning'?"

"But this is horrible!"

"Yes, it is horrible."

"We're up against a homicidal maniac."

"Yes."

His quietness was more impressive than any heroics could have been. I handed back the letter with a shudder.

The following morning saw us at a conference of powers. The Chief Constable of Sussex, the Assistant Commissioner of the C.I.D., Inspector Glen from Andover, Superintendent Carter of the Sussex police, Japp and a younger inspector called Crome, and Dr. Thompson, the famous alienist, were all assembled together. The postmark on this letter was Hampstead, but in Poirot's opinion little importance could be attached to this fact.

The matter was discussed fully. Dr. Thompson was a pleasant middle-aged man who, in spite of his learning, contented himself with homely language, avoiding the technicalities of his profession.

"There's no doubt," said the Assistant Commissioner, "that the two letters are in the same hand. Both were written by the same person."

"And we can fairly assume that that person was responsible for the Andover murder."

"Quite. We've now got definite warning of a second crime scheduled to take place on the 25th—to-morrow—at Bexhill. What steps can be taken?"

The Sussex Chief Constable looked at his superintendent.

"Well, Carter, what about it?"

The superintendent shook his head gravely.

"It's difficult, sir. There's not the least clue towards whom the victim may be. Speaking fair and square, what steps *can* we take?"

"A suggestion," murmured Poirot.

Their faces turned to him.

"I think it possible that the surname of the intended victim will begin with the letter B."

"That would be something," said the superintendent doubtfully.

"An alphabetical complex," said Dr. Thompson thoughtfully.

"I suggest it as a possibility—no more. It came into my mind when I saw the name Ascher clearly written over the shop door of the unfortunate woman who was murdered last month. When I got the letter naming Bexhill it occurred to me as a possibility that the victim as well as the place might be selected by an alphabetical system."

"It's possible," said the doctor. "On the other hand, it may be that the name Ascher was a coincidence—that the victim this time, no matter what her name is, will again be an old woman who keeps a shop. We're dealing, remember, with a madman. So far he hasn't given us any clue as to motive."

"Has a madman any motive, sir?" asked the superintendent sceptically.

"Of course he has, man. A deadly logic is one of the special characteristics of acute mania. A man may believe himself divinely appointed to kill clergymen—or doctors—or old women in tobacco shops—and there's always some perfectly coherent reason behind it. We mustn't let the alphabetical business run away with us. Bexhill succeeding to Andover *may* be a mere coincidence."

"We can at least take certain precautions, Carter, and make a special note of the B's, especially small shopkeepers, and keep a watch on all small tobacconists and newsagents looked after by a single person. I don't think there's anything more we can do than that. Naturally keep tabs on all strangers as far as possible."

The superintendent uttered a groan.

"With the schools breaking up and the holidays beginning? People are fairly flooding into the place this week."

"We must do what we can," the Chief Constable said sharply.

Inspector Glen spoke in his turn.

"I'll have a watch kept on any one connected with the Ascher business. Those two witnesses, Partridge and Riddell, and of course on Ascher himself. If they show any signs of leaving Andover they'll be followed."

The conference broke up after a few more suggestions and a little desultory conversation.

"Poirot," I said as we walked along by the river, "surely this crime can be prevented?"

He turned a haggard face to me.

"The sanity of a city full of men against the insanity of one? I fear, Hastings—I very much fear. Remember the long-continued successes of Jack the Ripper."

"It's horrible," I said.

"Madness, Hastings, is a terrible thing. . . . *I am afraid . . . I am very much afraid. . . .*"

CHAPTER IX

THE BEXHILL-ON-SEA MURDER

I STILL remember my awakening on the morning of the 25th of July. It must have been about seven-thirty.

Poirot was standing by my bedside gently shaking me by the shoulder. One glance at his face brought me from semi-consciousness into the full possession of my faculties.

"What is it?" I demanded, sitting up rapidly.

His answer came quite simply, but a wealth of emotion lay behind the three words he uttered.

"It has happened."

"What?" I cried. "You mean—but *to-day* is the 25th."

"It took place last night—or rather in the early hours of this morning."

As I sprang from bed and made a rapid toilet, he recounted briefly what he had just learnt over the telephone.

"The body of a young girl has been found on the beach at Bexhill. She has been identified as Elizabeth Barnard, a waitress in one of the cafés, who lived with her parents in a little recently built bungalow. Medical evidence gave the time of death as between 11.30 and 1 A.M."

"They're quite sure that this is *the* crime?" I asked, as I hastily lathered my face.

"An A.B.C. open at the trains to Bexhill was found actually under the body."

I shivered.

"This is horrible!"

"Faites attention, Hastings. I do not want a second tragedy in my rooms!"

I wiped the blood from my chin rather ruefully.

"What is our plan of campaign?" I asked.

"The car will call for us in a few moments' time. I will bring you a cup of coffee here so that there will be no delay in starting."

Twenty minutes later we were in a fast police car crossing the Thames on our way out of London.

With us was Inspector Crome, who had been present at the conference the other day, and who was officially in charge of the case.

Crome was a very different type of officer from Japp. A much younger man, he was the silent, superior type. Well educated and well read, he was, for my taste, several shades too pleased with himself. He had lately gained kudos over a series of child murders, having patiently tracked down the criminal who was now in Broadmoor.

He was obviously a suitable person to undertake the present case, but I thought that he was just a little too aware of the fact himself. His manner to Poirot was a shade patronizing. He deferred to him as a younger man to an older one—in a rather self-conscious, "public-school" way.

"I've had a good long talk with Dr. Thompson," he said. "He's very interested in the 'chain' or 'series' type of murder. It's the product of a particular distorted type of mentality. As a layman one can't, of course, appreciate the finer points as they present themselves to a medical point of view." He coughed. "As a matter of fact—my last case—I don't know whether you read about it—the Mabel Homer case, the Muswell Hill schoolgirl, you know—that man Capper was extraordinary. Amazingly difficult to pin the crime on to him—it was his third, too! Looked as sane as you or I. But there are various tests—verbal traps, you know—quite modern, of course, there was nothing of that kind in your day. Once you can induce a man to give himself again, you've got him! He knows that you know and his nerve goes. He starts giving himself away right and left."

"Even in my day that happened sometimes," said Poirot.

Inspector Crome looked at him and murmured conversationally:

"Oh, yes?"

There was silence between us for some time. As we passed New Cross Station, Crome said:

"If there's anything you want to ask me about the case, pray do so."

"You have not, I presume, a description of the dead girl?"

"She was twenty-three years of age, engaged as a waitress at the Ginger Cat café—"

"*Pas ça.* I wondered—if she were pretty?"

"As to that I've no information," said Inspector Crome with a hint of withdrawal. His manner said: "Really—these foreigners! All the same!"

A faint look of amusement came into Poirot's eyes.

"It does not seem to you important, that? Yet, *pour une femme,* it is of the first importance. Often it decides her destiny!"

Inspector Crome fell back on his conversational full stop.

"Oh, yes?" he inquired politely.

Another silence fell.

It was not until we were nearing Sevenoaks that Poirot opened the conversation again.

"Were you informed, by any chance, how and with what the girl was strangled?"

Inspector Crome replied briefly.

"Strangled with her own belt—a thick, knitted affair, I gather."

Poirot's eyes opened very wide.

"Aha," he said. "At last we have a piece of information that is very definite. That tells one something, does it not?"

"I haven't seen it yet," said Inspector Crome coldly.

I felt impatient with the man's caution and lack of imagination.

"It gives us the hall-mark of the murderer," I said. "The girl's own belt. It shows the particular beastliness of his mind!"

Poirot shot me a glance I could not fathom. On the face of it it conveyed humorous impatience. I thought that perhaps it was a warning not to be too outspoken in front of the inspector.

I relapsed into silence.

At Bexhill we were greeted by Superintendent Carter. He had with him a pleasant-faced, intelligent-looking young inspector called Kelsey. The latter was detailed to work in with Crome over the case.

"You'll want to make your own inquiries, Crome," said the superintendent. "So I'll just give you the main heads of the matter and then you can get busy right away."

"Thank you, sir," said Crome.

"We've broken the news to her father and mother," said the superintendent. "Terrible shock to them, of course. I left them to recover a bit before questioning them, so you can start from the beginning there."

"There are other members of the family—yes?" asked Poirot.

"There's a sister—a typist in London. She's been communicated with. And there's a young man—in fact, she was supposed to be out with him last night, I gather."

"Any help from the A.B.C. guide?" asked Crome.

"It's there," the superintendent nodded towards the table. "No fingerprints. Open at the page for Bexhill. A new copy, I should say—doesn't seem to have been opened much. Not bought anywhere round here. I've tried all the likely stationers!"

"Who discovered the body, sir?"

"One of these fresh-air, early-morning old colonels. Colonel Jerome. He was out with his dog about 6 A.M. Went along the front in the direction of Cooden, and down on to the beach. Dog went off and sniffed at something. Colonel called it. Dog didn't come. Colonel had a look and thought something queer was up. Went over and looked. Behaved very properly. Didn't touch her at all and rang us up immediately."

"And the time of death was round about midnight last night?"

"Between midnight and 1 A.M.—that's pretty certain. Our homicidal joker is a man of his word. If he says the 25th, it is the 25th—though it may have been only by a few minutes."

Crome nodded.

"Yes, that's his mentality all right. There's nothing else? Nobody saw anything helpful?"

"Not as far as we know. But it's early yet. Every one who saw a girl in white walking with a man last night will be along to tell us about it soon, and as I imagine there were about four or five hundred girls in white walking with young men last night, it ought to be a nice business."

"Well, sir, I'd better get down to it," said Crome. "There's the café and there's the girl's home. I'd better go to both of them. Kelsey can come with me."

"And Mr. Poirot?" asked the superintendent.

"I will accompany you," said Poirot to Crome with a little bow.

Crome, I thought, looked slightly annoyed. Kelsey, who had not seen Poirot before, grinned broadly.

It was an unfortunate circumstance that the first time people saw my friend they were always disposed to consider him as a joke of the first water.

"What about this belt she was strangled with?" asked Crome. "Mr. Poirot is inclined to think it's a valuable clue. I expect he'd like to see it."

"Du tout," said Poirot quickly. "You misunderstood me."

"You'll get nothing from that," said Carter. "It wasn't a leather belt—might have got fingerprints if it had been. Just a thick sort of knitted silk—ideal for the purpose."

I gave a shiver.

"Well," said Crome, "we'd better be getting along."

We set out forthwith.

Our first visit was to the Ginger Cat. Situated on the sea front, this was the usual type of small tea-room. It had little tables covered with orange-checked cloths and basket-work chairs of exceeding discomfort with orange cushions on them. It was the kind of place that specialized in morning coffee, five different kinds of teas (Devonshire, farmhouse, fruit, Carlton and plain), and a few sparing lunch dishes for females such as scrambled eggs and shrimps and macaroni au gratin.

The morning coffees were just getting under way. The manageress ushered us hastily into a very untidy back sanctum.

"Miss—er—Merrion?" inquired Crome.

Miss Merrion bleated out in a high, distressed gentlewoman voice:

"That is my name. This is a most distressing business. Most distressing. How it will affect our business I really cannot *think!*"

Miss Merrion was a very thin woman of forty with wispy orange hair (indeed she was astonishingly like a ginger cat herself). She played nervously with various fichus and frills that were part of her official costume.

"You'll have a boom," said Inspector Kelsey encouragingly. "You'll see! You won't be able to serve teas fast enough!"

"Disgusting," said Miss Merrion. "Truly disgusting. It makes one despair of human nature."

But her eye brightened nevertheless.

"What can you tell me about the dead girl, Miss Merrion?"

"Nothing," said Miss Merrion positively. "Absolutely nothing!"

"How long had she been working here?"

"This was the second summer."

"You were satisfied with her?"

"She was a good waitress—quick and obliging."

"She was pretty, yes?" inquired Poirot.

Miss Merrion, in her turn, gave him an "Oh, these foreigners" look.

"She was a nice, clean-looking girl," she said distantly.

"What time did she go off duty last night?" asked Crome.

"Eight o'clock. We close at eight. We do not serve dinners. There is no demand for them. Scrambled eggs and tea (Poirot shuddered) people come in for up to seven o'clock and sometimes after, but our rush is over by 6.30."

"Did she mention to you how she proposed to spend her evening?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Merrion emphatically. "We were not on those terms."

"No one came in and called for her? Anything like that?"

"No."

"Did she seem quite her ordinary self? Not excited or depressed?"

"Really I could not say," said Miss Merrion aloofly.

"How many waitresses do you employ?"

"Two normally, and an extra two after the 20th July until the end of August."

"But Elizabeth Barnard was not one of the extras?"

"Miss Barnard was one of the regulars."

"What about the other one?"

"Miss Higley? She is a very nice young lady."

"Were she and Miss Barnard friends?"

"Really I could not say."

"Perhaps we'd better have a word with her."

"Now?"

"If you please."

"I will send her to you," said Miss Merrion, rising. "Please keep her as short a time as possible. This is the morning coffee rush hour."

The feline and gingery Miss Merrion left the room.

"Very refined," remarked Inspector Kelsey. He mimicked the lady's mincing tone. *"Really I could not say."*

A plump girl, slightly out of breath, with dark hair, rosy cheeks and dark eyes goggling with excitement, bounced in.

"Miss Merrion sent me," she announced breathlessly.

"Miss Higley?"

"Yes, that's me."

"You knew Elizabeth Barnard?"

"Oh, yes, I knew Betty. Isn't it *awful?* It's just too awful! I can't believe it's true. I've been saying to the girls all the morning I just *can't* believe it! 'You know, girls,' I said, 'it just doesn't seem *real.*' Betty! I mean, Betty Barnard, who's been here all along, *murdered!* 'I just can't believe it,' I said. Five or six times I've pinched myself just to see if I wouldn't wake up. Betty murdered . . . It's—well, you know what I mean—it doesn't seem real."

"You knew the dead girl well?" asked Crome.

"Well, she's worked here longer than I have. I only came this March. She was here last year. She was rather quiet, if you know what I mean. She wasn't one to joke or laugh a lot. I don't mean that she was exactly *quiet*—she'd plenty of fun in her and all that—but she didn't—well, she was quiet and she wasn't quiet, if you know what I mean."

I will say for Inspector Crome that he was exceedingly patient. As a witness the buxom Miss Higley was persistently maddening. Every statement she made was repeated and qualified half a dozen times. The net result was meagre in the extreme.

She had not been on terms of intimacy with the dead girl. Elizabeth Barnard, it could be guessed, had considered herself a cut above Miss Higley. She had been friendly in working hours, but the girls had not seen much of her out of them. Elizabeth Barnard had had a "friend."—worked in the estate agents near the station. Court & Brunskill. No, he wasn't Mr. Court nor Mr. Brunskill. He was a clerk there. She didn't know his name. But she knew him by sight well. Good-looking—oh, very good-looking, and always so nicely dressed. Clearly, there was a tinge of jealousy in Miss Higley's heart.

In the end it boiled down to this. Elizabeth Barnard had not confided in any one in the café as to her plans for the evening, but in Miss Higley's opinion she had been going to meet her "friend." She had had on a new white dress, "ever so sweet with one of the new necks."

We had a word with each of the other two girls but with no further results. Betty Barnard had not said anything as to her plans and no one had noticed her in Bexhill during the course of the evening.

CHAPTER X

THE BARNARDS

ELIZABETH BARNARD'S parents lived in a minute bungalow, one of fifty or so recently run up by a speculative builder on the confines of the town. The name of it was Llandudno.

Mr. Barnard, a stout, bewildered-looking man of fifty-five or so, had noticed our approach and was standing waiting in the doorway.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said.

Inspector Kelsey took the initiative.

"This is Inspector Crome of Scotland Yard, sir," he said. "He's come down to help us over this business."

"Scotland Yard?" said Mr. Barnard hopefully. "That's good. This murdering villain's got to be laid by the heels. My poor little girl—" His face was distorted by a spasm of grief.

"And this is Mr. Hercule Poirot, also from London, and er—"

"Captain Hastings," said Poirot.

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," said Mr. Barnard mechanically. "Come into the snuggery. I don't know that my poor wife's up to seeing you. All broken up, she is."

However, by the time that we were ensconced in the living-room of the bungalow, Mrs. Barnard had made her appearance. She had evidently been crying bitterly, her eyes were reddened and she walked with the uncertain gait of a person who had had a great shock.

"Why, Mother, that's fine," said Mr. Barnard. "You're sure you're all right—eh?"

He patted her shoulder and drew her down into a chair.

"The superintendent was very kind," said Mr. Barnard. "After he'd broken the news to us, he said he'd leave any questions till later when we'd got over the first shock."

"It is too cruel. Oh, it is too cruel," cried Mrs. Barnard tearfully. "The cruelest thing that ever was, it is."

Her voice had a faintly sing-song intonation that I thought for a moment was foreign till I remembered the name on the gate and realized that the "effer wass" of her speech was in reality proof of her Welsh origin.

"It's very painful, madam, I know," said Inspector Crome. "And we've every sympathy for you, but we want to know all the facts we can so as to get to work as quick as possible."

"That's sense, that is," said Mr. Barnard, nodding approval.

"Your daughter was twenty-three, I understand. She lived here with you and worked at the Ginger Cat café, is that right?"

"That's it."

"This is a new place, isn't it? Where did you live before?"

"I was in the ironmongery business in Kennington. Retired two years ago. Always meant to live near the sea."

"You have two daughters?"

"Yes. My elder daughter works in an office in London in the City."

"Weren't you alarmed when your daughter didn't come home last night?"

"We didn't know she hadn't," said Mrs. Barnard tearfully. "Dad and I always go to bed early. Nine o'clock's our time. We never knew Betty hadn't come home till the police officer came and said—and said—"

She broke down.

"Was your daughter in the habit of—er—returning home late?"

"You know what girls are nowadays, inspector," said Barnard. "Independent, that's what they are. These summer evenings they're not going to rush home. All the same, Betty was usually in by eleven."

"How did she get in? Was the door open?"

"Left the key under the mat—that's what we always did."

"There is some rumour, I believe, that your daughter was engaged to be married?"

"They don't put it as formally as that nowadays," said Mr. Barnard.

"Donald Fraser his name is, and I liked him. I liked him very much," said Mrs. Barnard. "Poor fellow, it'll be terrible for him—this news. Does he know yet, I wonder?"

"He works in Court & Brunskill's, I understand?"

"Yes, they're the estate agents."

"Was he in the habit of meeting your daughter most evenings after her work?"

"Not every evening. Once or twice a week would be nearer."

"Do you know if she was going to meet him yesterday?"

"She didn't say. Betty never said much about what she was doing or where she was going. But she was a good girl, Betty was. Oh, I can't believe—"

Mrs. Barnard started sobbing again.

"Pull yourself together, old lady. Try to hold up, Mother," urged her husband. "We've got to get to the bottom of this. . . ."

"I'm sure Donald would never—would never—" sobbed Mrs. Barnard.

"Now just you pull yourself together," repeated Mr. Barnard.

He turned to the two inspectors.

"I wish to God I could give you some help—but the plain fact is I know nothing—nothing at all that can help you to the dastardly scoundrel who did this. Betty was just a merry, happy girl—with a decent young fellow that she was—well, we'd have called it walking out with in my young days. Why any one should want to murder her simply beats me—it doesn't make sense."

"You're very near the truth there, Mr. Barnard," said Crome. "I tell you what I'd like to do—have a look over Miss Barnard's room. There may be something—letters—or a diary."

"Look over it and welcome," said Mr. Barnard, rising.

He led the way. Crome followed him, then Poirot, then Kelsey, and I brought up the rear.

I stopped for a minute to retie my shoelace, and as I did so, a taxi drew up outside and a girl jumped out of it. She paid the driver and hurried up the path to the house, carrying a small suitcase. As she entered the door she saw me and stopped dead.

There was something so arresting in her pose that it intrigued me.

"Who are you?" she said.

I came down a few steps. I felt embarrassed as to how exactly to reply. Should I give my name? Or mention that I had come here with the police? The girl, however, gave me no time to make a decision.

"Oh, well," she said, "I can guess."

She pulled off the little white woollen cap she was wearing and threw it on the ground. I could see her better now as she turned a little so that the light fell on her.

My first impression was of the Dutch dolls that my sisters used to play with in my childhood. Her hair was black and cut in a straight bob and a bang across the forehead. Her cheek-bones were high and her whole figure had a queer modern angularity that was not, somehow, unattractive. She was not good-looking—plain rather—but there was an intensity about her, a forcefulness that made her a person quite impossible to overlook.

"You are Miss Barnard?" I asked.

"I am Megan Barnard. You belong to the police, I suppose?"

"Well," I said, "not exactly—"

She interrupted me.

"I don't think I've got anything to say to you. My sister was a nice bright girl with no men friends. Good-morning."

She gave a short laugh as she spoke and regarded me challengingly.

"That's the correct phrase, I believe?" she said.

"I'm not a reporter, if that's what you're getting at."

"Well, what are you?" She looked round. "Where's mum and dad?"

"Your father is showing the police your sister's bedroom. Your mother's in there. She's very upset."

The girl seemed to make a decision.

"Come in here," she said.

She pulled open a door and passed through. I followed her and found myself in a small, neat kitchen.

I was about to shut the door behind me—but found an unexpected resistance. The next moment Poirot had slipped quietly into the room and shut the door behind him.

"Mademoiselle Barnard?" he said with a quick bow.

"This is M. Hercule Poirot," I said.

Megan Barnard gave him a quick, appraising glance.

"I've heard of you," she said. "You're the fashionable private sleuth, aren't you?"

"Not a pretty description—but it suffices," said Poirot.

The girl sat down on the edge of the kitchen table. She felt in her bag for a cigarette. She placed it between her lips, lighted it, and then said in between two puffs of smoke:

"Somehow, I don't see what M. Hercule Poirot is doing in our humble little crime."

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "what you do not see and what I do not see would probably fill a volume. But all that is of no practical importance. What *is* of practical importance is something that will not be easy to find."

"What's that?"

"Death, mademoiselle, unfortunately creates a *prejudice.* A prejudice in favour of the deceased. I heard what you said just now to my friend Hastings. 'A nice bright girl with no men friends.' You said that in mockery of the newspapers. And it is very true—when a young girl is dead, that is the kind of thing that is said. She was bright. She was happy. She was sweet-tempered. She had not a care in the world. She had no undesirable acquaintances. There is a great charity always to the dead. Do you know what I should like this minute? I should like to find some one who knew Elizabeth Barnard *and who does not know she is dead!* Then, perhaps, I should hear what is useful to me—the truth."

Megan Barnard looked at him for a few minutes in silence whilst she smoked. Then, at last, she spoke. Her words made me jump.

"Betty," she said, "was an unmitigated little ass!"

CHAPTER XI

MEGAN BARNARD

As I said, Megan Barnard's words, and still more the crisp business-like tone in which they were uttered, made me jump.

Poirot, however, merely bowed his head gravely.

"A la bonne heure," he said. "You are intelligent, mademoiselle."

Megan Barnard said, still in the same detached tone:

"I was extremely fond of Betty. But my fondness didn't blind me from seeing exactly the kind of silly little fool she was—and even telling her so upon occasions! Sisters are like that."

"And did she pay any attention to your advice?"

"Probably not," said Megan cynically.

"Will you, mademoiselle, be precise."

The girl hesitated for a minute or two.

Poirot said with a slight smile:

"I will help you. I heard what you said to Hastings. That your sister was a bright, happy girl with no men friends. It was—*un peu*—the *opposite* that was true, was it not?"

Megan said slowly:

"There wasn't any harm in Betty. I want you to understand that. She'd always go straight. She's not the week-ending kind. Nothing of that sort. But she liked being taken out and dancing and—oh, cheap flattery and compliments and all that sort of thing."

"And she was pretty—yes?"

This question, the third time I had heard it, met this time with a practical response.

Megan slipped off the table, went to her suitcase, snapped it open and extracted something which she handed to Poirot.

In a leather frame was a head and shoulders of a fair-haired, smiling girl. Her hair had evidently recently been permed, it stood out from her head in a mass of rather frizzy curls. The smile was arch and artificial. It was certainly not a face that you could call beautiful, but it had an obvious and cheap prettiness.

Poirot handed it back, saying:

"You and she do not resemble each other, mademoiselle."

"Oh! I'm the plain one of the family. I've always known that." She seemed to brush aside the fact as unimportant.

"In what way exactly do you consider your sister was behaving foolishly? Do you mean, perhaps, in relation to Mr. Donald Fraser?"

"That's it, exactly. Don's a very quiet sort of person—but he—well, naturally he'd resent certain things—and then—"

"And then what, mademoiselle?"

His eyes were on her very steadily.

It may have been my fancy but it seemed to me that she hesitated a second before answering.

"I was afraid that he might—chuck her altogether. And that would have been a pity. He's a very steady and hard-working man and would have made her a good husband."

Poirot continued to gaze at her. She did not flush under his glance but returned it with one of her own equally steady and with something else in it—something that reminded me of her first defiant, disdainful manner.

"So it is like that," he said at last. "We do not speak the truth any longer."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned towards the door.

"Well," she said, "I've done what I could to help you."

Poirot's voice arrested her.

"Wait, mademoiselle. I have something to tell you. Come back."

Rather unwillingly, I thought, she obeyed.

Somewhat to my surprise, Poirot plunged into the whole story of the A.B.C. letters, the murder at Andover, and the railway guide found by the bodies.

He had no reason to complain of any lack of interest on her part. Her lips parted, her eyes gleaming, she hung on his words.

"Is this all true, M. Poirot?"

"Yes, it is true."

"You really mean my sister was killed by some horrible homicidal maniac?"

"Precisely."

She drew a deep breath.

"Oh! Betty—Betty— How—how *ghastly!*"

"You see, mademoiselle, that the information for which I ask you can give freely without wondering whether or no it will hurt any one."

"Yes, I see that now."

"Then let us continue our conversation. I have formed the idea that this Donald Fraser has, perhaps, a violent and jealous temper, is that right?"

Megan Barnard said quietly:

"I'm trusting you now, M. Poirot. I'm going to give you the absolute truth. Don is, as I say, a very quiet person—a bottled-up person, if you know what I mean. He can't always express what he feels in words. But underneath it all he minds things terribly. And he's got a jealous nature. He was always jealous of Betty. He was devoted to her—and of course she was very fond of him, but it wasn't in Betty to be fond of one person and not notice anybody else. She wasn't made that way. She'd got a—well, an eye for any nice-looking man who'd pass the time of day with her. And of course, working in the Ginger Cat, she was always running up against men—especially in the summer holidays. She was always very pat with her tongue and if they chaffed her she'd chaff back again. And then perhaps she'd meet them and go to the pictures or something like that. Nothing serious—never anything of that kind—but she just liked her fun. She used to say that as she'd got to settle down with Don one day she might as well have her fun now while she could."

Megan paused and Poirot said:

"I understand. Continue."

"It was just that attitude of mind of hers that Don couldn't understand. If she was really keen on him he couldn't see why she wanted to go out with other people. And once or twice they had flaming big rows about it."

"M. Don, he was no longer quiet?"

"It's like all those quiet people, when they do lose their tempers they lose them with a vengeance. Don was so violent that Betty was frightened."

"When was this?"

"There was one row nearly a year ago and another—a worse one—just over a month ago. I was home for the week-end—and I got them to patch it up again, and it was then that I tried to knock a little sense into Betty—told her she was a little fool. All she would say was that there hadn't been any harm in it. Well, that was true enough, but all the same she was riding for a fall. You see, after the row a year ago, she'd got into the habit of telling a few useful lies on the principle that what the mind doesn't know the heart doesn't grieve over. This last flare-up came because she'd told Don she was going to Hastings to see a girl pal—and he found out that she'd really been over to Eastbourne with some man. He was a married man, as it happened, and he'd been a bit secretive about the business anyway—and so that made it worse. They had an awful scene—Betty saying that she wasn't married to him yet and she had a right to go about with whom she pleased and Don all white and shaking and saying that one day—one day—"

"Yes?"

"He'd commit murder—" said Megan in a lowered voice.

She stopped and stared at Poirot.

He nodded his head gravely several times.

"And so, naturally, you were afraid . . ."

"I didn't think he'd actually done it—not for a minute! But I was afraid it might be brought up—the quarrel and all that he'd said—several people knew about it."

Again Poirot nodded his head gravely.

"Just so. And I may say, mademoiselle, that but for the egotistical vanity of a killer, that is just what would have happened. If Donald Fraser escapes suspicion, it will be thanks to A.B.C.'s maniacal boasting."

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

"Do you know if your sister met this married man, or any other man, lately?"

Megan shook her head.

"I don't know. I've been away, you see."

"But what do you think?"

"She mayn't have met that particular man again. He'd probably sheer off if he thought there was a chance of a row, but it wouldn't surprise me if Betty had—well, been telling Don a few lies again. You see, she did so enjoy dancing and the pictures, and of course, Don couldn't afford to take her all the time."

"If so, is she likely to have confided in any one? The girl at the café, for instance?"

"I don't think that's likely. Betty couldn't bear the Higley girl. She thought her common. And the others would be new. Betty wasn't the confiding sort anyway."

An electric bell trilled sharply above the girl's head.

She went to the window and leaned out. She drew back her head sharply.

"It's Don. . . ."

"Bring him in here," said Poirot quickly. "I would like a word with him before our good inspector takes him in hand."

Like a flash Megan Barnard was out of the kitchen, and a couple of seconds later she was back again leading Donald Fraser by the hand.

CHAPTER XII

DONALD FRASER

I FELT sorry at once for the young man. His white haggard face and bewildered eyes showed how great a shock he had had.

He was a well-made, fine-looking young fellow, standing close on six foot, not good-looking, but with a pleasant, freckled face, high cheek-bones and flaming red hair.

"What's this, Megan?" he said. "Why in here? For God's sake, tell me—I've only just heard—Betty . . ."

His voice trailed away.

Poirot pushed forward a chair and he sank down on it.

My friend then extracted a small flask from his pocket, poured some of its contents into a convenient cup which was hanging on the dresser and said:

"Drink some of this, Mr. Fraser. It will do you good."

The young man obeyed. The brandy brought a little colour back into his face. He sat up straighter and turned once more to the girl. His manner was quite quiet and self-controlled.

"It's true, I suppose?" he said. "Betty is—dead—killed?"

"It's true, Don."

He said as though mechanically:

"Have you just come down from London?"

"Yes. Dad phoned me."

"By the 9.20, I suppose?" said Donald Fraser.

His mind, shrinking from reality, ran for safety along these unimportant details.

"Yes."

There was silence for a minute or two, then Fraser said:

"The police? Are they doing anything?"

"They're upstairs now. Looking through Betty's things, I suppose."

"They've no idea who—? They don't know—?"

He stopped.

He had all a sensitive, shy person's dislike of putting violent facts into words.

Poirot moved forward a little and asked a question. He spoke in a business-like, matter-of-fact voice as though what he asked was an unimportant detail.

"Did Miss Barnard tell you where she was going last night?"

Fraser replied to the question. He seemed to be speaking mechanically.

"She told me she was going with a girl friend to St. Leonards."

"Did you believe her?"

"I—" Suddenly the automaton came to life. "What the devil do you mean?"

His face then, menacing, convulsed by sudden passion, made me understand that a girl might well be afraid of rousing his anger.

Poirot said crisply:

"Betty Barnard was killed by a homicidal murderer. Only by speaking the exact truth can you help us to get on his track."

His glance for a minute turned to Megan.

"That's right, Don," she said. "It isn't a time for considering one's own feelings or any one else's. You've got to come clean."

Donald Fraser looked suspiciously at Poirot.

"Who are you? You don't belong to the police?"

"I am better than the police," said Poirot. He said it without conscious arrogance. It was, to him, a simple statement of fact.

"Tell him," said Megan.

Donald Fraser capitulated.

"I—wasn't sure," he said. "I believed her when she said it. Never thought of doing anything else. Afterwards—perhaps it was something in her manner. I—I, well, I began to wonder."

"Yes?" said Poirot.

He had sat down opposite Donald Fraser. His eyes, fixed on the other man's, seemed to be exercising a mesmeric spell.

"I was ashamed of myself for being so suspicious. But—but I *was* suspicious . . . I thought of going down to the front and watching her when she left the café. I actually went there. Then I felt I couldn't do that. Betty would see me and she'd be angry. She'd realize at once that I was watching her."

"What did you do?"

"I went over to St. Leonards. Got over there by eight o'clock. Then I watched the buses—to see if she were in them. . . . But there was no sign of her. . . ."

"And then?"

"I—I lost my head rather. I was convinced she was with some man. I thought it probable he had taken her in his car to Hastings. I went on there—looked in hotels and restaurants, hung round cinemas—went on the pier. All damn foolishness. Even if she was there I was unlikely to find her, and anyway, there were heaps of other places he might have taken her to instead of Hastings."

He stopped. Precise as his tone had remained, I caught an undertone of that blind, bewildering misery and anger that had possessed him at the time he described.

"In the end I gave it up—came back."

"At what time?"

"I don't know. I walked. It must have been midnight or after when I got home. . . ."

"Then—"

The kitchen door opened.

"Oh, there you are," said Inspector Kelsey.

Inspector Crome pushed past him, shot a glance at Poirot and a glance at the two strangers.

"Miss Megan Barnard and Mr. Donald Fraser," said Poirot, introducing them.

"This is Inspector Crome from London," he explained.

Turning to the inspector, he said:

"While you pursued your investigations upstairs I have been conversing with Miss Barnard and Mr. Fraser, endeavouring if I could to find something that will throw light upon the matter."

"Oh, yes?" said Inspector Crome, his thoughts not upon Poirot but upon the two new-comers.

Poirot retreated to the hall. Inspector Kelsey said kindly as he passed:

"Get anything?"

But his attention was distracted by his colleague and he did not wait for a reply.

I joined Poirot in the hall.

"Did anything strike you, Poirot?" I inquired.

"Only the amazing magnanimity of the murderer, Hastings."

I had not got the courage to say that I had not the least idea what he meant.

CHAPTER XIII

A CONFERENCE

CONFERENCES!

Much of my memories of the A.B.C. case seem to be of conferences.

Conferences at Scotland Yard. At Poirot's rooms. Official conferences. Unofficial conferences.

This particular conference was to decide whether or no the facts relative to the anonymous letters should or should not be made public in the press.

The Bexhill murder had attracted much more attention than the Andover one.

It had, of course, far more elements of popularity. The victim was a young and good-looking girl to begin with. Also, it had taken place at a popular seaside resort.

All the details of the crime were reported fully and rehashed daily in thin disguises. The A.B.C. railway guide came in for its share of attention. The favourite theory was that it had been bought locally by the murderer and that it was a valuable clue to his identity. It also seemed to show that he had come to the place by train and was intending to leave for London.

The railway guide had not figured at all in the meagre accounts of the Andover murder so there seemed at present little likelihood of the two crimes being connected in the public eye.

"We've got to decide upon a policy," said the Assistant Commissioner. "The thing is—which way will give us the best results? Shall we give the public the facts—enlist their co-operation—after all, it'll be the co-operation of several million people, looking out for a madman—"

"He won't look like a madman," interjected Dr. Thompson.

"—looking out for sales of A.B.C.'s—and so on. Against that I suppose there's the advantage of working in the dark—not letting our man know what we're up to, but then there's the fact that *he knows very well that we know.* He's drawn attention to himself deliberately by his letters. Eh, Crome, what's your opinion?"

"I look at it this way, sir. If you make it public, *you're playing A.B.C.'s game.* That's what he wants—publicity—notoriety. That's what he's out after. I'm right, aren't I, doctor? He wants to make a splash."

Thompson nodded.

The Assistant Commissioner said thoughtfully:

"So you're for baulking him. Refusing him the publicity he's hankering after. What about you, M. Poirot?"

Poirot did not speak for a minute. When he did it was with an air of choosing his words carefully.

"It is difficult for me, Sir Lionel," he said. "I am, as you might say, an interested party. The challenge was sent to me. If I say, 'Suppress that fact—do not make it public,' may it not be thought that it is my vanity that speaks? That I am afraid for my reputation? It is difficult! To speak out—to tell all—that has its advantages. It is, at least, a warning. . . . On the other hand, I am as convinced as Inspector Crome *that it is what the murderer wants us to do.*"

"H'm!" said the Assistant Commissioner, rubbing his chin. He looked across at Dr. Thompson. "Suppose we refuse our lunatic the satisfaction of the publicity he craves. What's he likely to do?"

"Commit another crime," said the doctor promptly. "Force your hand."

"And if we splash the thing about in headlines. Then what's his reaction?"

"Same answer. One way you *feed* his megalomania, the other you *baulk* it. The result's the same. Another crime."

"What do you say, M. Poirot?"

"I agree with Dr. Thompson."

"A cleft stick—eh? How many crimes do you think this—lunatic has in mind?"

Dr. Thompson looked across at Poirot.

"Looks like A to Z," he said cheerfully.

"Of course," he went on, "he won't get there. Not nearly. You'll have him by the heels long before that. Interesting to know how he'd have dealt with the letter X." He recalled himself guiltily from this purely enjoyable speculation. "But you'll have him long before that. G or H, let's say."

The Assistant Commissioner struck the table with his fist.

"My God, are you telling me we're going to have five more murders?"

"It won't be as much as that, sir," said Inspector Crome. "Trust me."

He spoke with confidence.

"Which letter of the alphabet do you place it at, inspector?" asked Poirot.

There was a slight ironic note in his voice. Crome, I thought, looked at him with a tinge of dislike adulterating the usual calm superiority.

"Might get him next time, M. Poirot. At any rate I'd guarantee to get him by the time he gets to F."

He turned to the Assistant Commissioner.

"I think I've got the psychology of the case fairly clear. Dr. Thompson will correct me if I'm wrong. I take it that every time he brings a crime off, his self-confidence increases about a hundred per cent. Every time he feels 'I'm clever—they can't catch me!' he becomes so overweeningly confident that he also becomes careless. He exaggerates his own cleverness and every one else's stupidity. Very soon he'll be hardly bothering to take any precautions at all. That's right, isn't it, doctor?"

Thompson nodded.

"That's usually the case. In non-medical terms it couldn't have been put better. You know something about such things, M. Poirot. Don't you agree?"

I don't think that Crome liked Thompson's appeal to Poirot. He considered that he and he only was the expert on this subject.

"It is as Inspector Crome says," agreed Poirot.

"Paranoea," murmured the doctor.

Poirot turned to Crome.

"Are there any material facts of interest in the Bexhill case?"

"Nothing very definite. A waiter at the Splendide at Eastbourne recognizes the dead girl's photograph as that of a young woman who dined there in company with a middle-aged man in spectacles. It's also been recognized at a roadhouse place called the Scarlet Runner, half-way between Bexhill and London. There they say she was with a man who looked like a naval officer. They can't both be right, but either of them's probable. Of course, there's a host of other identifications, but most of them not good for much. We haven't been able to trace the A.B.C."

"Well, you seem to be doing all that can be done, Crome," said the Assistant Commissioner. "What do you say, M. Poirot? Does any line of inquiry suggest itself to you?"

Poirot said slowly:

"It seems to me that there is one very important clue—the discovery of the motive."

"Isn't that pretty obvious? An alphabetical complex. Isn't that what you called it, doctor?"

"Ça, oui," said Poirot. "There is an alphabetical complex. A madman in particular has always a very strong reason for the crimes he commits."

"Come, come, M. Poirot," said Crome. "Look at Stoneman in 1929. He ended by trying to do away with any one who annoyed him in the slightest degree."

Poirot turned to him.

"Quite so. But if you are a sufficiently great and important person, it is necessary that you should be spared small annoyances. If a fly settles on your forehead again and again, maddening you by its tickling—what do you do? You endeavour to kill that fly. You have no qualms about it. *You* are important—the fly is not. You kill the fly and the annoyance ceases. Your action appears to you sane and justifiable. Another reason for killing a fly is if you have a strong passion for hygiene. The fly is a potential source of danger to the community—the fly must go. So works the mind of the mentally deranged criminal. But consider now this case—*if the victims are alphabetically selected, then they are not being removed because they are a source of annoyance to him personally.* It would be too much of a coincidence to combine the two."

"That's a point," said Dr. Thompson. "I remember a case where a woman's husband was condemned to death. She started killing the members of the jury one by one. Quite a time before the crimes were connected up. They seemed entirely haphazard. But as M. Poirot says, there isn't such a thing as a murderer who commits crimes at random. Either he removes people who stand (however insignificantly) in his path, or else he kills by conviction. He removes clergymen, or policemen, or prostitutes because he firmly believes that they *should* be removed. That doesn't apply here either as far as I can see. Mrs. Ascher and Betty Barnard cannot be linked as members of the same class. Of course, it's possible that there is a sex complex. Both victims have been women. We can tell better, of course, after the next crime—"

"For God's sake, Thompson, don't speak so glibly of the next crime," said Sir Lionel irritably. "We're going to do all we can to prevent another crime."

Dr. Thompson held his peace and blew his nose with some violence.

"Have it your own way," the noise seemed to say. "If you won't face facts—"

The Assistant Commissioner turned to Poirot.

"I see what you're driving at, but I'm not quite clear yet."

"I ask myself," said Poirot, "what passes in itself exactly in the mind of the murderer? He kills, it would seem from his letters, *pour le sport*—to amuse himself. Can that really be true? And even if it is true, on what principle does he select his victims *apart from the merely alphabetical one?* If he kills merely to amuse himself he would not advertise the fact, since, otherwise, he could kill with impunity. But no, he seeks, as we all agree, to make the splash in the public eye—to assert his personality. In what way has his personality been suppressed that one can connect with the two victims he has so far selected? A final suggestion—Is his motive direct personal hatred of *me,* of Hercule Poirot? Does he challenge me in public because I have (unknown to myself) vanquished him somewhere in the course of my career? Or is his animosity impersonal—directed against a foreigner? And if so, what again has led to that? What injury has he suffered at a foreigner's hand?"

"All very suggestive questions," said Dr. Thompson.

Inspector Crome cleared his throat.

"Oh, yes? A little unanswerable at present, perhaps."

"Nevertheless, my friend," said Poirot, looking straight at him, *"it is there in those questions that the solution lies.* If we knew the exact reason—fantastic, perhaps, to us—but logical to him—of *why* our madman commits these crimes, we should know, perhaps, who the next victim is likely to be."

Crome shook his head.

"He selects them haphazard—that's my opinion."

"The magnanimous murderer," said Poirot.

"What's that you say?"

"I said—the magnanimous murderer! Franz Ascher would have been arrested for the murder of his wife—Donald Fraser might have been arrested for the murder of Betty Barnard—if it had not been for the warning letters of A.B.C. Is he, then, so soft-hearted that he cannot bear others to suffer for something they did not do?"

"I've known stranger things happen," said Dr. Thompson. "I've known men who've killed half a dozen victims all broken up because one of their victims didn't die instantaneously and suffered pain. All the same, I don't think that that is our fellow's reason. He wants the credit of these crimes for his own honour and glory. That's the explanation that fits best."

"We've come to no decision about the publicity business," said the Assistant Commissioner.

"If I may make a suggestion, sir," said Crome. "Why not wait till the receipt of the next letter? Make it public then—special editions, etc. It will make a bit of a panic in the particular town named, but it will put every one whose name begins with C on their guard, and it'll put A.B.C. on his mettle. He'll be determined to succeed. And that's when we'll get him."

How little we knew what the future held.

CHAPTER XIV

THE THIRD LETTER

I WELL remember the arrival of A.B.C.'s third letter.

I may say that all precautions had been taken so that when A.B.C. resumed his campaign there should be no unnecessary delays. A young sergeant from Scotland Yard was attached to the house and if Poirot and I were out it was his duty to open anything that came so as to be able to communicate with headquarters without loss of time.

As the days succeeded each other we had all grown more and more on edge. Inspector Crome's aloof and superior manner grew more and more aloof and superior as one by one his more hopeful clues petered out. The vague descriptions of men said to have been seen with Betty Barnard proved useless. Various cars noticed in the vicinity of Bexhill and Cooden were either accounted for or could not be traced. The investigation of purchases of A.B.C. railway guides caused inconvenience and trouble to heaps of innocent people.

As for ourselves, each time the postman's familiar rat-tat sounded on the door, our hearts beat faster with apprehension. At least that was true for me, and I cannot but believe that Poirot experienced the same sensation.

He was, I knew, deeply unhappy over the case. He refused to leave London, preferring to be on the spot in case of emergency. In those hot dog days even his moustaches drooped—neglected for once by their owner.

It was on a Friday that A.B.C.'s third letter came. The evening post arrived about ten o'clock.

When we heard the familiar step and the brisk rat-tat, I rose and went along to the box. There were four or five letters, I remember. The last one I looked at was addressed in printed characters.

"Poirot," I cried. . . . My voice died away.

"It has come? Open it, Hastings. Quickly. Every moment may be needed. We must make our plans."

I tore open the letter (Poirot for once did not reproach me with untidiness) and extracted the printed sheet.

"Read it," said Poirot.

I read aloud:

POOR MR. POIROT,—Not so good at these little criminal matters as you thought yourself, are you? Rather past your prime, perhaps? Let us see if you can do any better this time. This time it's an easy one. Churston on the 30th. Do try and do something about it! It's a bit dull having it *all* my own way, you know!

Good hunting. Ever yours,
A.B.C.

"Churston," I said, jumping to our own copy of an A.B.C. "Let's see where it is."

"Hastings." Poirot's voice came sharply and interrupted me. "When was that letter written? Is there a date on it?"

I glanced at the letter in my hand.

"Written on the 27th," I announced.

"Did I hear you aright, Hastings? Did he give the date of the murder as the *30th?"*

"That's right. Let me see, that's—"

"Bon Dieu, Hastings—do you not realize. *To-day is the 30th."*

His eloquent hand pointed to the calendar on the wall. I caught up the daily paper to confirm it.

"But why—how—" I stammered.

Poirot caught up the torn envelope from the floor. Something unusual about the address had registered itself vaguely in my brain, but I had been too anxious to get at the contents of the letter to pay more than fleeting attention to it.

Poirot was at the time living in Whitehaven Mansions.The address ran: *M. Hercule Poirot, Whitehorse, Mansions,* across the corner was scrawled: *"Not known at Whitehorse Mansions, E. C. 1. nor at Whitehorse Court—try Whitehaven Mansions."*

"Mon Dieu!" murmured Poirot. "Does even chance aid this madman? *Vite—vite—*we must get on to Scotland Yard."

A minute or two later we were speaking to Crome over the wire. For once the self-controlled inspector did not reply "Oh, yes?" Instead a quickly stifled curse came to his lips. He heard what we had to say, then rang off in order to get a trunk connection to Churston as rapidly as possible.

"C'est trop tard," murmured Poirot.

"You can't be sure of that," I argued, though without any great hope.

He glanced at the clock.

"Twenty minutes past ten? An hour and forty minutes to go. Is it likely that A.B.C. will have held his hand so long?"

I opened the railway guide I had previously taken from its shelf.

"Churston, Devon," I read, "from Paddington 204¾miles. Population 544. It sounds a fairly small place. Surely our man will be bound to be noticed there."

"Even so, another life will have been taken," murmured Poirot. "What are the trains? I imagine train will be quicker than car."

"There's a midnight train—sleeping-car to Newton Abbot—gets there 6.08 A.M., and to Churston at 7.15."

"That is from Paddington?"

"Paddington, yes."

"We will take that, Hastings."

"You'll hardly have time to get news before we start."

"If we receive bad news to-night or to-morrow morning, does it matter which?"

"There's something in that."

I put a few things together in a suitcase whilst Poirot once more rang up Scotland Yard.

A few minutes later he came into the bedroom and demanded:

"Mais qu'est-ce que vous faites là?"

"I was packing for you. I thought it would save time."

"Vous éprouvez trop d'émotion, Hastings. It affects your hands and your wits. Is that a way to fold a coat? And regard what you have done to my pyjamas. If the hairwash breaks what will befall them?"

"Good heavens, Poirot," I cried, "this is a matter of life and death. What does it matter what happens to our clothes?"

"You have no sense of proportion, Hastings. We cannot catch a train earlier than the time that it leaves, and to ruin one's clothes will not be the least helpful in preventing a murder."

Taking his suitcase from me firmly, he took the packing into his own hands.

He explained that we were to take the letter and envelope to Paddington with us. Some one from Scotland Yard would meet us there.

When we arrived on the platform the first person we saw was Inspector Crome.

He answered Poirot's look of inquiry.

"No news as yet. All men available are on the lookout. All persons whose name begins with C are being warned by phone when possible. There's just a chance. Where's the letter?"

Poirot gave it to him.

He examined it, swearing softly under his breath.

"Of all the damned luck. The stars in their courses fight for the fellow."

"You don't think," I suggested, "that it was done on purpose?"

Crome shook his head.

"No. He's got his rules—crazy rules—and abides by them. Fair warning. He makes a point of that. That's where his boastfulness comes in. I wonder now—I'd almost bet the chap drinks White Horse whisky."

"Ah, c'est ingénieux ça!" said Poirot, driven to admiration in spite of himself. "He prints the letter and the bottle is in front of him."

"That's the way of it," said Crome. "We've all of us done much the same thing one time or another: unconsciously copied something that's just under the eye. He started off White and went on horse instead of haven. . . ."

The inspector, we found, was also travelling by the train.

"Even if by some unbelievable luck nothing happened, Churston is the place to be. Our murderer is there, or has been there to-day. One of my men is on the phone here up to the last minute in case anything comes through."

Just as the train was leaving the station we saw a man running down the platform. He reached the inspector's window and called up something.

As the train drew out of the station Poirot and I hurried along the corridor and tapped on the door of the inspector's sleeper.

"You have news—yes?" demanded Poirot.

Crome said quietly:

"It's about as bad as it can be. Sir Carmichael Clarke has been found with his head bashed in."

Sir Carmichael Clarke, although his name was not very well known to the general public, was a man of some eminence. He had been in his time a very well-known throat specialist. Retiring from his profession very comfortably off, he had been able to indulge what had been one of the chief passions of his life—a collection of Chinese pottery and porcelain. A few years later, inheriting a considerable fortune from an elderly uncle, he had been able to indulge his passion to the full, and he was now the possessor of one of the best-known collections of Chinese art. He was married but had no children, and lived in a house he had built for himself near the Devon coast, only coming to London on rare occasions such as when some important sale was on.

It did not require much reflection to realize that his death, following that of the young and pretty Betty Barnard, would provide the best newspaper sensation for years. The fact that it was August and that the papers were hard up for subject matter would make matters worse.

"Eh bien," said Poirot. "It is possible that publicity may do what private

efforts have failed to do. The whole country now will be looking for A.B.C."

"Unfortunately," I said, "that's what he wants."

"True. But it may, all the same, be his undoing. Gratified by success, he may become careless. . . . That is what I hope—that he may be drunk with his own cleverness."

"How odd all this is, Poirot," I exclaimed, struck suddenly by an idea. "Do you know, this is the first crime of this kind that you and I have worked on together? All our murders have been—well, private murders, so to speak."

"You are quite right, my friend. Always, up to now, it has fallen to our lot to work from the *inside.* It has been the history of the victim that was important. The important points have been: 'Who benefited by the death? What opportunities had those round him to commit the crime?' It has always been the *'crime intime.'* Here, for the first time in our association, it is cold-blooded, impersonal murder. Murder from the *outside."*

I shivered.

"It's rather horrible. . . ."

"Yes. I felt from the first, when I read the original letter, that there was something wrong—misshapen. . . ."

He made an impatient gesture.

"One must not give way to the nerves. . . . *This is no worse than any ordinary crime. . . ."*

"It is. . . . It is. . . ."

"Is it worse to take the life or lives of strangers than to take the life of some one near and dear to you—some one who trusts and believes in you, perhaps?"

"It's worse because it's *mad.* . . ."

"No, Hastings. It is not *worse.* It is only more *difficult."*

"No, no, I do not agree with you. It's infinitely more frightening."

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

"It should be easier to discover because it is mad. A crime committed by some one shrewd and sane would be far more complicated. Here, if one could but hit on the *idea* . . . This alphabetical business, it has discrepancies. If I could once see the *idea*—then everything would be clear and simple. . . ."

He sighed and shook his head.

"These crimes must not go on. Soon, soon, I must see the truth. . . . Go, Hastings. Get some sleep. There will be much to do to-morrow."

CHAPTER XV

SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE

CHURSTON, lying as it does between Brixham on the one side and Paignton and Torquay on the other, occupies a position about half-way round the curve of Torbay. Until about ten years ago it was merely a golf links and below the links a green sweep of countryside dropping down to the sea with only a farmhouse or two in the way of human occupation. But of late years there have been big building developments between Churston and Paignton and the coastline is now dotted with small houses and bungalows, new roads, etc.

Sir Carmichael Clarke had purchased a site of some two acres commanding an uninterrupted view of the sea. The house he had built was of modern design—a white rectangle that was not unpleasing to the eye. Apart from two big galleries that housed his collection it was not a large house.

Our arrival there took place about 8 A.M. A local police officer had met us at the station and had put us *au courant* of the situation.

Sir Carmichael Clarke, it seemed, had been in the habit of taking a stroll after dinner every evening. When the police rang up—at some time after eleven—it was ascertained that he had not returned. Since his stroll usually followed the same course, it was not long before a search-party discovered his body. Death was due to a crashing blow with some heavy instrument on the back of the head. *An open A.B.C. had been placed face downwards on the dead body.*

We arrived at Combeside (as the house was called) at about eight o'clock. The door was opened by an elderly butler whose shaking hands and disturbed face showed how much the tragedy had affected him.

"Good-morning, Deveril," said the local police officer.

"Good-morning, Mr. Wells."

"These are the gentlemen from London, Deveril."

"This way, sir." He ushered us into a long dining-room where breakfast was laid. "I'll get Mr. Franklin, sir."

A minute or two later a big fair-haired man with a sunburnt face entered the room.

This was Franklin Clarke, the dead man's only brother.

He had the resolute competent manner of a man accustomed to meeting with emergencies.

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

Inspector Wells made the introductions.

"This is Inspector Crome of the C.I.D. Mr. Hercule Poirot and—er—Captain Hayter."

"Hastings," I corrected coldly.

Franklin Clarke shook hands with each of us in turn and in each case the handshake was accompanied by a piercing look.

"Let me offer you some breakfast," he said. "We can discuss the position as we eat."

There were no dissentient voices and we were soon doing justice to excellent eggs and bacon and coffee.

"Now for it," said Franklin Clarke. "Inspector Wells gave me a rough idea of the position last night—though I may say it seemed one of the wildest tales I have ever heard. Am I really to believe, Inspector Crome, that my poor brother is the victim of a homicidal maniac, that this is the third murder that has occurred and that *in each case an A.B.C. railway guide has been deposited beside the body?*"

"That is substantially the position, Mr. Clarke."

"But *why?* What earthly benefit can accrue from such a crime—even in the most diseased imagination?"

Poirot nodded his head in approval.

"You go straight to the point, Mr. Franklin," he said.

"It's not much good looking for motives at this stage, Mr. Clarke," said Inspector Crome. "That's a matter for an alienist—though I may say that I've had a certain experience of criminal lunacy and that the motives are usually grossly inadequate. There is a desire to assert one's personality, to make a splash in the public eye—in fact, to be a somebody instead of a nonentity."

"Is that true, M. Poirot?"

Clarke seemed incredulous. His appeal to the older man was not too well received by Inspector Crome, who frowned.

"Absolutely true," replied my friend.

"At any rate such a man cannot escape detection long," said Clarke thoughtfully.

"Vous croyez? Ah, but they are cunning—*ces gens là!* And you must remember *such a type has usually all the outer signs of insignificance*—he belongs to the class of person who is usually passed over and ignored or even laughed at!"

"Will you let me have a few facts, please, Mr. Clarke," said Crome, breaking in on the conversation.

"Certainly."

"Your brother, I take it, was in his usual health and spirits yesterday? He received no unexpected letters? Nothing to upset him?"

"No. I should say he was quite his usual self."

"Not upset and worried in any way?"

"Excuse me, inspector. I didn't say that. To be upset and worried was my poor brother's normal condition."

"Why was that?"

"You may not know that my sister-in-law, Lady Clarke, is in very bad health. Frankly, between ourselves, she is suffering from an incurable cancer, and cannot live very much longer. Her illness has preyed terribly on my brother's mind. I myself returned from the East not long ago and I was shocked at the change in him."

Poirot interpolated a question.

"Supposing, Mr. Clarke, that your brother had been found shot at the foot of a cliff—or shot with a revolver beside him. What would have been your first thought?"

"Quite frankly, I should have jumped to the conclusion that it was suicide," said Clarke.

"Encore!" said Poirot.

"What is that?"

"A fact that repeats itself. It is of no matter."

"Anyway, it *wasn't* suicide," said Crome with a touch of curtness. "Now I believe, Mr. Clarke, that it was your brother's habit to go for a stroll every evening?"

"Quite right. He always did."

"Every night?"

"Well, not if it was pouring with rain, naturally."

"And every one in the house knew of this habit?"

"Of course."

"And outside?"

"I don't quite know what you mean by outside. The gardener may have been aware of it or not, I don't know."

"And in the village?"

"Strictly speaking, we haven't got a village. There's a post office and cottages at Churston Ferrers—but there's no village or shops."

"I suppose a stranger hanging round the place would be fairly easily noticed?"

"On the contrary. In August all this part of the world is a seething mass of strangers. They come over every day from Brixham and Torquay and Paignton in cars and buses and on foot. Broadsands, which is down there (he pointed), is a very popular beach and so is Elbury Cove—it's a well-known beauty spot and people come there and picnic. I wish they didn't! You've no idea how beautiful and peaceful this part of the world is in June and the beginning of July."

"So you don't think a stranger would be noticed?"

"Not unless he looked—well, off his head."

"This man doesn't look off his head," said Crome with certainty. "You see what I'm getting at, Mr. Clarke. This man must have been spying out the land beforehand and discovered your brother's habit of taking an evening stroll. I suppose, by the way, that no strange man came up to the house and asked to see Sir Carmichael yesterday?"

"Not that I know of—but we'll ask Deveril."

He rang the bell and put the question to the butler.

"No, sir, no one came to see Sir Carmichael. And I didn't notice any one hanging about the house either. No more did the maids, because I've asked them."

The butler waited a moment, then inquired: "Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, Deveril, you can go."

The butler withdrew, drawing back in the doorway to let a young woman pass.

Franklin Clarke rose as she came.

"This is Miss Grey, gentlemen. My brother's secretary."

My attention was caught at once by the girl's extraordinary Scandinavian fairness. She had the almost colourless ash hair—light-grey eyes—and transparent glowing pallor that one finds amongst Norwegians and Swedes. She looked about twenty-seven and seemed to be as efficient as she was decorative.

"Can I help you in any way?" she asked as she sat down.

Clarke brought her a cup of coffee, but she refused any food.

"Did you deal with Sir Carmichael's correspondence?" asked Crome.

"Yes, all of it."

"I suppose he never received a letter or letters signed A.B.C.?"

"A.B.C.?" She shook her head. "No, I'm sure he didn't."

"He didn't mention having seen any one hanging about during his evening walks lately?"

"No. He never mentioned anything of the kind."

"And you yourself have noticed no strangers?"

"Not exactly hanging about. Of course, there are a lot of people what you might call *wandering* about at this time of year. One often meets people strolling with an aimless look across the golf links or down the lanes to the sea. In the same way, practically every one one sees this time of the year is a stranger."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Inspector Crome asked to be taken over the ground of Sir Carmichael's nightly walk. Franklin Clarke led the way through the French window, and Miss Grey accompanied us.

She and I were a little behind the others.

"All this must have been a terrible shock to you all," I said.

"It seems quite unbelievable. I had gone to bed last night when the police rang up. I heard voices downstairs and at last I came out and asked what was the matter. Deveril and Mr. Clarke were just setting out with lanterns."

"What time did Sir Carmichael usually come back from his walk?"

"About a quarter to ten. He used to let himself in by the side door and then sometimes he went straight to bed, sometimes to the gallery where his collections were. That is why, unless the police had rung up, he would probably not have been missed till they went to call him this morning."

"It must have been a terrible shock to his wife?"

"Lady Clarke is kept under morphia a good deal. I think she is in too dazed a condition to appreciate what goes on round her."

We had come out through a garden gate on to the golf links. Crossing a corner of them, we passed over a stile into a steep, winding lane.

"This leads down to Elbury Cove," explained Franklin Clarke. "But two years ago they made a new road leading from the main road to Broadsands and on to Elbury, so that now this lane is practically deserted."

We went on down the lane. At the foot of it a path led between brambles and bracken down to the sea. Suddenly we came out on a grassy ridge overlooking the sea and a beach of glistening white stones. All round dark green trees ran down to the sea. It was an enchanting spot—white, deep green—and sapphire blue.

"How beautiful!" I exclaimed.

Clarke turned to me eagerly.

"Isn't it? Why people want to go abroad to the Riviera when they've got this! I've wandered all over the world in my time and, honest to God, I've never seen anything as beautiful."

Then, as though ashamed of his eagerness, he said in a more matter-of-fact tone:

"This was my brother's evening walk. He came as far as here, then back up the path, and turning to the right instead of the left, went past the farm and across the fields back to the house."

We proceeded on our way till we came to a spot near the hedge, halfway across the field where the body had been found.

Crome nodded.

"Easy enough. The man stood here in the shadow. Your brother would have noticed nothing till the blow fell."

The girl at my side gave a quick shiver.

Franklin Clarke said:

"Hold up, Thora. It's pretty beastly, but it's no use shirking facts."

Thora Grey—the name suited her.

We went back to the house where the body had been taken after being photographed.

As we mounted the wide staircase the doctor came out of a room, black bag in hand.

"Anything to tell us, doctor?" inquired Clarke.

The doctor shook his head.

"Perfectly simple case. I'll keep the technicalities for the inquest. Anyway, he didn't suffer. Death must have been instantaneous."

He moved away.

"I'll just go in and see Lady Clarke."

A hospital nurse came out of a room further along the corridor and the doctor joined her.

We went into the room out of which the doctor had come.

I came out again rather quickly. Thora Grey was still standing at the head of the stairs.

There was a queer scared expression on her face.

"Miss Grey—" I stopped. "Is anything the matter?"

She looked at me.

"I was thinking," she said—"about D."

"About D?" I stared at her stupidly.

"Yes. The next murder. Something must be done. It's got to be stopped."

Clarke came out of the room behind me.

He said:

"What's got to be stopped, Thora?"

"These awful murders."

"Yes." His jaw thrust itself out aggressively. "I want to talk to M. Poirot sometime. . . . Is Crome any good?" He shot the words out unexpectedly.

I replied that he was supposed to be a very clever officer.

My voice was perhaps not as enthusiastic as it might have been.

"He's got a damned offensive manner," said Clarke. "Looks as though he knows everything—and what *does* he know? Nothing at all as far as I can make out."

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

"M. Poirot's the man for my money. I've got a plan. But we'll talk of that later."

He went along the passage and tapped at the same door as the doctor had entered.

I hesitated for a moment. The girl was staring in front of her.

"What are you thinking of, Miss Grey?"

She turned her eyes towards me.

"I'm wondering *where he is now* . . . the murderer, I mean. It's not twelve hours yet since it happened. . . . Oh! aren't there any *real* clairvoyants who could see where he is now and what he is doing . . . ?"

"The police are searching—" I began.

My commonplace words broke broke the spell. Thora Grey pulled herself together.

"Yes," she said. "Of course."

In her turn she descended the staircase. I stood there a moment longer conning her words over in my mind.

A.B.C. . . .

Where was he now . . . ?

CHAPTER XVI

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

MR. ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST came out with the rest of the audience from the Torquay Pavilion, where he had been seeing and hearing that highly emotional film, *Not a Sparrow*. . . .

He blinked a little as he came out into the afternoon sunshine and peered round him in that lost-dog fashion that was characteristic of him.

He murmured to himself: "It's an idea. . . ."

Newsboys passed along crying out:

"Latest . . . Homicidal Maniac at Churston . . ."

They carried placards on which was written:

CHURSTON MURDER. LATEST.

Mr. Cust fumbled in his pocket, found a coin, and bought a paper. He did not open it at once.

Entering the Princess Gardens, he slowly made his way to a shelter facing Torquay harbour. He sat down and opened the paper.

There were big headlines:

SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE MURDERED.
TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT CHURSTON.
WORK OF A HOMICIDAL MANIAC.

And below them:

Only a month ago England was shocked and startled by the murder of a young girl, Elizabeth Barnard, at Bexhill. It may be remembered that an A.B.C. railway guide figured in the case. An A.B.C. was also found by the dead body of Sir Carmichael Clarke, and the police incline to the belief that both crimes were committed by the same person. Can it be possible that a homicidal murderer is going the round of our seaside resorts? . . .

A young man in flannel trousers and a bright blue aertex shirt who was sitting beside Mr. Cust remarked:

"Nasty business—eh?"

Mr. Cust jumped.

"Oh, very—very—"

His hands, the young man noticed, were trembling so that he could hardly hold the paper.

"You never know with lunatics," said the young man chattily. "They don't always look balmy, you know. Often they seem just the same as you or me. . . ."

"I suppose they do," said Mr. Cust.

"It's a fact. Sometimes it's the war what unhinged them—never been right since."

"I—I expect you're right."

"I don't hold with wars," said the young man.

His companion turned on him.

"I don't hold with plague and sleeping sickness and famine and cancer . . . but they happen all the same!"

"War's preventable," said the young man with assurance.

Mr. Cust laughed. He laughed for some time.

The young man was slightly alarmed.

"He's a bit batty himself," he thought.

Aloud he said:

"Sorry, sir, I expect you were in the war."

"I was," said Mr. Cust. "It—it—unsettled me. My head's never been right since. It aches, you know. Aches terribly."

"Oh! I'm sorry about that," said the young man awkwardly.

"Sometimes I hardly know what I'm doing. . . ."

"Really? Well, I must be getting along," said the young man and removed himself hurriedly. He knew what people were once they began to talk about their health.

Mr. Cust remained with his paper.

He read and reread. . . .

People passed to and fro in front of him.

Most of them were talking of the murder. . . .

"Awful . . . do you think it was anything to do with the Chinese? Wasn't the waitress in a Chinese café? . . ."

"Actually on the golf links . . ."

"I heard it was no the beach . . ."

"—but, darling, we took our tea to Elbury only *yesterday* . . ."

"—police are sure to get him . . ."

"—say he may be arrested any minute now . . ."

"—quite likely he's in Torquay . . . that other woman was who murdered the what do you call 'ems . . ."

Mr. Cust folded up the paper very neatly and laid it on the seat. Then he rose and walked sedately along towards the town.

Girls passed him, girls in white and pink and blue, in summery frocks and pyjamas and shorts. They laughed and giggled. Their eyes appraised the men they passed.

Not once did their eyes linger for a second on Mr. Cust. . . .

He sat down at a little table and ordered tea and Devonshire cream. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

MARKING TIME

WITH the murder of Sir Carmichael Clarke the A.B.C. mystery leaped into the fullest prominence.

The newspapers were full of nothing else. All sorts of "clues" were reported to have been discovered. Arrests were announced to be imminent. There were photographs of every person or place remotely connected with the murder. There were interviews with any one who would give interviews. There were questions asked in Parliament.

The Andover murder was now bracketed with the other two.

It was the belief of Scotland Yard that the fullest publicity was the best chance of laying the murderer by the heels. The population of Great Britain turned itself into an army of amateur sleuths.

The *Daily Flicker* had the grand inspiration of using the caption:

He may be in *your* town!

Poirot, of course, was in the thick of things. The letters sent to him were published and facsimiled. He was abused wholesale for not having prevented the crimes and defended on the ground that he was on the point of naming the murderer.

Reporters incessantly badgered him for interviews.

What M. Poirot Says To-day.

Which was usually followed by a half-column of imbecilities.

M. Poirot Takes Grave View of Situation.

M. Poirot on the Eve of Success.

Captain Hastings, the great friend of M. Poirot, told our Special Representative . . .

"Poirot," I would cry. "Pray believe me. I never said anything of the kind."

My friend would reply kindly:

"I know, Hastings—I know. The spoken word and the written—there is an astonishing gulf between them. There is a way of turning sentences that completely reverses the original meaning."

"I wouldn't like you to think I'd said—"

"But do not worry yourself. All this is of no importance. These imbecilities, even, may help."

"How?"

"Eh bien," said Poirot grimly. "If our madman reads what I am supposed to have said to the *Daily Blague* to-day, he will lose all respect for me as an opponent!"

I am, perhaps, giving the impression that nothing practical was being done in the way of investigations. On the contrary, Scotland Yard and the local police of the various counties were indefatigable in following up the smallest clues.

Hotels, people who kept lodgings, boarding-houses—all those within a wide radius of the crimes were questioned minutely.

Hundreds of stories from imaginative people who had "seen a man looking very queer and rolling his eyes," or "noticed a man with a sinister face slinking along," were sifted to the last detail. No information, even of the vaguest character, was neglected. Trains, buses, trams, railway porters, conductors, bookstalls, stationers—there was an indefatigable round of questions and verifications.

At least a score of people were detained and questioned until they could satisfy the police as to their movements on the night in question.

The net result was not entirely a blank. Certain statements were borne in mind and noted down as of possible value, but without further evidence they led nowhere.

If Crome and his colleagues were indefatigable, Poirot seemed to me strangely supine. We argued now and again.

"But what is it that you would have me do, my friend? The routine inquiries, the police make them better than I do. Always—always you want me to run about like the dog."

"Instead of which you sit at home like—like—"

"A sensible man! My force, Hastings, is in my *brain,* not in my *feet!* All the time, whilst I seem to you idle, I am reflecting."

"Reflecting?" I cried. "Is this a time for reflection?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes."

"But what can you possibly gain by reflection? You know the facts of the three cases by heart."

"It is not the facts I reflect upon—but the mind of the murderer."

"The mind of a madman!"

"Precisely. And therefore not to be arrived at in a minute. *When I know what the murderer is like, I shall be able to find out who he is.* And all the time I learn more. After the Andover crime, what did we know about the murderer? Next to nothing at all. After the Bexhill crime? A little more. After the Churston murder? More still. I begin to see—not what *you* would like to see—the outlines of *a face and form*—but the outlines of a *mind.* A mind that moves and works in certain definite directions. After the next crime—"

"Poirot!"

My friend looked at me dispassionately.

"But, yes, Hastings, I think it is almost certain there will be another. A lot depends on *la chance.* So far our *inconnu* has been lucky. This time the luck may turn against him. But in any case, after another crime, we shall know infinitely more. Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions. There are confusing indications—sometimes it is as though there were two intelligences at work—but soon the outline will clear itself, *I shall know.*"

"Who it is?"

"No, Hastings, I shall not know his name and address! I shall know *what kind of a man he is. . . .*"

"And then?"

"Et alors, je vais à la pêche."

As I looked rather bewildered, he went on:

"You comprehend, Hastings, an expert fisherman knows exactly what flies to offer to what fish. I shall offer the right kind of fly."

"And then?"

"And then? And then? You are as bad as the superior Crome with his eternal 'Oh, yes?' *Eh bien,* and then he will take the bait and the hook and we will reel in the line. . . ."

"In the meantime people are dying right and left."

"Three people. And there are, what is it—about 140—road deaths every week?"

"That is entirely different."

"It is probably exactly the same to those who die. For the others, the relations, the friends—yes, there is a difference, but one thing at least rejoices me in this case."

"By all means let us hear anything in the nature of rejoicing."

"*Inutile* to be so sarcastic. It rejoices me that there is here no shadow of guilt to distress the innocent."

"Isn't this worse?"

"No, no, a thousand times no! There is nothing so terrible as to live in an atmosphere of suspicion—to see eyes watching you and the love in them changing to fear—nothing so terrible as to suspect those near and dear to you. . . . It is poisonous—a miasma. No, the poisoning of life for the innocent, that, at least, we cannot lay at A.B.C.'s door."

"You'll soon be making excuses for the man!" I said bitterly.

"Why not? He may believe himself fully justified. We may, perhaps, end by having sympathy with his point of view."

"Really, Poirot!"

"Alas! I have shocked you. First my inertia—and then my views."

I shook my head without replying.

"All the same," said Poirot after a minute or two. "I have one project that will please you—since it is active and not passive. Also, it will entail a lot of conversation and practically no thought."

I did not quite like his tone.

"What is it?" I asked cautiously.

"The extraction from the friends, relations and servants of the victims of all they know."

"Do you suspect them of keeping things back, then?"

"Not intentionally. But telling everything you know always implies *selection.* If I were to say to you, recount me your day yesterday, you would perhaps reply: 'I rose at nine, I breakfasted at half-past, I had eggs and bacon and coffee, I went to my club, etc.' You would not include: 'I tore my nail and had to cut it. I rang for shaving water. I spilt a little coffee on the tablecloth. I brushed my hat and put it on.' One cannot tell *everything.* Therefore one *selects.* At the time of a murder people select what *they* think is important. But quite frequently they think wrong!"

"And how is one to get at the right things?"

"Simply, as I said just now, by conversation. By talking! By discussing a certain happening, or a certain person, or a certain day, over and over again, extra details are bound to arise."

"What kind of details?"

"Naturally that I do not know or I should not want to find out! But enough time has passed now for ordinary things to reassume their value. It is against all mathematical laws that in three cases of murder there is no single fact or sentence with a bearing on the case. Some trivial happening, some trivial remark there *must* be which would be a pointer! It is looking for the needle in the haystack, I grant—*but in the haystack there is a needle*—of that I am convinced!"

It seemed to me extremely vague and hazy.

"You do not see it? Your wits are not so sharp as those of a mere servant girl."

He tossed me over a letter. It was neatly written in a sloping board-school hand.

DEAR SIR,—I hope you will forgive the liberty I take in writing to you. I have been thinking a lot since these awful two murders like poor Auntie's.

It seems as though we're all in the same boat, as it were. I saw the young lady's picture in the paper, the young lady, I mean, that is the sister of the young lady that was killed at Bexhill. I made so bold as to write to her and tell her I was coming to London to get a place and asked if I could come to her or her mother as I said two heads might be better than one and I would not want much wages, but only to find out who this awful fiend is and perhaps we might get at it better if we could say what we knew something might come of it.

The young lady wrote very nicely and said as how she worked in an office and lived in a hostel, but she suggested I might write to you and she said she'd been thinking something of the same kind as I had. And she said we were in the same trouble and we ought to stand together. So I am writing, sir, to say I am coming to London and this is my address.

Hoping I am not troubling you,

Yours respectfully,
MARY DROWER.

"Mary Drower," said Poirot, "is a very intelligent girl."

He picked up another letter.

"Read this."

It was a line from Franklin Clarke, saying that he was coming to London and would call upon Poirot the following day if not inconvenient.

"Do not despair, *mon ami,*" said Poirot. "Action is about to begin."

CHAPTER XVIII

POIROT MAKES A SPEECH

Franklin Clarke arrived at three o'clock on the following afternoon and came straight to the point without beating about the bush.

"M. Poirot," he said, "I'm not satisfied."

"No, Mr. Clarke?"

"I've no doubt that Crome is a very efficient officer, but, frankly, he puts my back up. That air of his of knowing best! I hinted something of what I had in mind to your friend here when he was down at Churston, but I've had all my brother's affairs to settle up and I haven't been free until now. My idea is, M. Poirot, that we oughtn't to let the grass grow under our feet—"

"Just what Hastings is always saying!"

"—but go right ahead. We've got to get ready for the next crime."

"So you think there will be a next crime?"

"Don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Very well, then. I want to get organized."

"Tell me your idea exactly?"

"I propose, M. Poirot, a kind of special legion—to work under your orders—composed of the friends and relatives of the murdered people."

"Une bonne idée!"

"I'm glad you approve. By putting our heads together I feel we might get at something. Also, when the next warning comes, by being on the spot, one of us might—I don't say it's probable—but we might recognize some person as having been near the scene of a previous crime."

"I see your idea, and I approve, but you must remember, Mr. Franklin, the relations and friends of the other victims are hardly in your sphere of life. They are employed persons and though they might be given a short vacation—"

Franklin Clarke interrupted.

"That's just it. I'm the only person in a position to foot the bill. Not that I'm particularly well off myself, but my brother died a rich man and it will eventually come to me. I propose, as I say, to enroll a special legion, the members to be paid for their services at the same rate as they get habitually, with, of course, the additional expenses."

"Who do you propose should form this legion?"

"I've been into that. As a matter of fact, I wrote to Miss Megan Barnard—indeed, this is partly her idea. I suggest myself, Miss Barnard, Mr. Donald Fraser, who was engaged to the dead girl. Then there is a niece of the Andover woman—Miss Barnard knows her address. I don't think the husband would be of any use to us—I hear he's usually drunk. I also think the Barnards—the father and mother—are a bit old for active campaigning."

"Nobody else?"

"Well—er—Miss Grey."

He flushed slightly as he spoke the name.

"Oh! Miss Grey?"

Nobody in the world could put a gentle nuance of irony into a couple of words better than Poirot. About thirty-five years fell away from Franklin Clarke. He looked suddenly like a shy schoolboy.

"Yes. You see, Miss Grey was with my brother for over two years. She knows the countryside and the people round, and everything. I've been away for a year and a half."

Poirot took pity on him and turned the conversation.

"You have been in the East? In China?"

"Yes. I had a kind of roving commission to purchase things for my brother."

"Very interesting it must have been. *Eh bien,* Mr. Clarke, I approve very highly of your idea. I was saying to Hastings only yesterday that a *rapprochement* of the people concerned was needed. It is necessary to pool reminiscences, to compare notes—*enfin* to talk the thing over—to talk—to talk—and again to talk. Out of some innocent phrase may come enlightenment."

A few days later the "Special Legion" met at Poirot's rooms.

As they sat round looking obediently towards Poirot, who had his place, like the chairman at a Board meeting, at the head of the table, I myself passed them, as it were, in review, confirming or revising my first impressions of them.

The three girls were all of them striking-looking—the extraordinary fair beauty of Thora Grey, the dark intensity of Megan Barnard, with her strange Red Indian immobility of face—Mary Drower, neatly dressed in a black coat and skirt, with her pretty, intelligent face. Of the two men, Franklin Clarke, big, bronzed and talkative, Donald Fraser, self-contained and quiet, made an interesting contrast to each other.

Poirot, unable, of course, to resist the occasion, made a little speech.

"Mesdames and Messieurs, you know what we are here for. The police are doing their utmost to track down the criminal. I, too, in my different way. But it seems to me a reunion of those who have a personal interest in the matter—and also, I may say, a personal knowledge of the victims—might have results that an outside investigation cannot pretend to attain.

"Here we have three murders—an old woman, a young girl, an elderly man. Only one thing links these three people together—*the fact that the same person killed them.* That means that *the same person was present in three different localities* and was seen necessarily by a large number of people. That he is a madman in an advanced stage of mania goes without saying. That his appearance and behaviour give no suggestion of such a fact is equally certain. This person—and though I say *he,* remember it may be a man or woman—has all the devilish cunning of insanity. He has succeeded so far in covering his traces completely. The police have certain vague indications but nothing upon which they can act.

"Nevertheless, there must exist indications which are not vague but certain. To take one particular point—this assassin he did not arrive in Bexhill at midnight and find conveniently on the beach a young lady whose name began with B—"

"Must we go into that?"

It was Donald Fraser who spoke—the words wrung from him, it seemed, by some inner anguish.

"It is necessary to go into everything, Monsieur," said Poirot, turning to him. "You are here, not to save your feelings by refusing to think of details, but if necessary to harrow them by going into the matter *au fond.* As I say, it was not *chance* that provided A. B .C. with a victim in Betty Barnard. There must have been deliberate selection on his part—and therefore premeditation. That is to say, he must have reconnoitred the ground *beforehand.* There were facts of which he had informed himself—the best hour for the committing of the crime at Andover—the *mise en scène* at Bexhill—the habits of Sir Carmichael Clarke at Churston. Me, for one, I refuse to believe that there is *no* indication—no slightest hint—that might help to establish his identity.

"I make the assumption that one—or possibly *all* of you—*knows something that they do not know they know.*

"Sooner or later, by reason of your association with one another, something will come to light, will take on a significance as yet undreamed of. It is like the jigsaw puzzle—each of you may have *a piece apparently without meaning, but which when reunited may show a definite portion of the picture as a whole.*"

"Words!" said Megan Barnard.

"Eh?" Poirot looked at her inquiringly.

"What you've been saying. It's just words. It doesn't mean anything."

She spoke with that kind of desperate dark intensity that I had come to associate with her personality.

"Words, mademoiselle, are only the outer clothing of ideas."

"Well, I think it's sense," said Mary Drower. "I do really, miss. It's often when you're talking over things that you seem to see your way clear. Your mind gets made up for you sometimes without your knowing how it's happened. Talking leads to a lot of things one way and another."

"If 'least said is soonest mended,' it's the converse we want here," said Franklin Clarke.

"What do you say, Mr. Fraser?"

"I rather doubt the practical applicability of what you say, M. Poirot."

"What do you think, Thora?" asked Clarke.

"I think the principle of talking things over is always sound."

"Suppose," suggested Poirot, "that you all go over your own remembrances of the time preceding the murder. Perhaps you'll start, Mr. Clarke."

"Let me see, on the morning of the day Car was killed I went off sailing. Caught eight mackerel. Lovely out there on the bay. Lunch at home. Irish stew, I remember. Slept in the hammock. Tea. Wrote some letters, missed the post, and drove into Paignton to post them. Then dinner and—I'm not ashamed to say it—reread a book of E. Nesbit's that I used to love as a kid. Then the telephone rang—"

"No further. Now reflect, Mr. Clarke, did you meet any one on your way down to the sea in the morning?"

"Lots of people."

"Can you remember anything about them?"

"Not a damned thing now."

"Sure?"

"Well—let's see—I remember a remarkably fat woman—she wore a striped silk dress and I wondered why—had a couple of kids with her . . . two young men with a fox terrier on the beach throwing stones for it—Oh, yes, a girl with yellow hair squeaking as she bathed—funny how things come back—like a photograph developing."

"You are a good subject. Now later in the day—the garden—going to the post—"

"The gardener watering . . . Going to the post? Nearly ran down a bicyclist—silly woman wobbling and shouting to a friend. That's all, I'm afraid."

Poirot turned to Thora Grey.

"Miss Grey?"

Thora Grey replied in her clear, positive voice:

"I did correspondence with Sir Carmichael in the morning—saw the housekeeper. I wrote letters and did needlework in the afternoon, I fancy. It is difficult to remember. It was quite an ordinary day. I went to bed early."

Rather to my surprise, Poirot asked no further. He said:

"Miss Barnard—can you bring back your remembrances of the last time you saw your sister?"

"It would be about a fortnight before her death. I was down for Saturday and Sunday. It was fine weather. We went to Hastings to the swimming pool."

"What did you talk about most of the time?"

"I gave her a piece of my mind," said Megan.

"And what else? She conversed of what?"

The girl frowned in an effort of memory.

"She talked about being hard up—of a hat and a couple of summer frocks she'd just bought. And a little of Don. . . . She also said she disliked Milly Higley—that's the girl at the café—and we laughed about the Merrion woman who keeps the café. . . . I don't remember anything else. . . ."

"She didn't mention any man—forgive me, Mr. Fraser—she might be meeting?"

"She wouldn't to me," said Megan dryly.

Poirot turned to the red-haired young man with the square jaw.

"Mr. Fraser—I want you to cast your mind back. You went, you said, to the café on the fatal evening. Your first intention was to wait there and watch for Betty Barnard to come out. Can you remember any one at all whom you noticed whilst you were waiting there?"

"There were a large number of people walking along the front. I can't remember any of them."

"Excuse me, but are you trying? However preoccupied the mind may be, the eye notices mechanically—unintelligently but accurately. . . ."

The young man repeated doggedly:

"I don't remember anybody."

Poirot sighed and turned to Mary Drower.

"I suppose you got letters from your aunt?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"When was the last?"

Mary thought a minute.

"Two days before the murder, sir."

"What did it say?"

"She said the old devil had been round and that she'd sent him off with a flea in the ear—excuse the expression, sir—said she expected me over on the Wednesday—that's my day out, sir—and she said we'd go to the pictures. It was going to be my birthday, sir."

Something—the thought of the little festivity perhaps, suddenly brought the tears to Mary's eyes. She gulped down a sob. Then apologised for it.

"You must forgive me, sir. I don't want to be silly. Crying's no good. It was just the thought of her—and me—looking forward to our treat. It upset me somehow, sir."

"I know just what you feel like," said Franklin Clarke. "It's always the little things that get one—and especially anything like a treat or a present—something jolly and natural. I remember seeing a woman run over once. She'd just bought some new shoes. I saw her lying there—and the burst parcel with the ridiculous little high-heeled slippers peeping out—it gave me a turn—they looked so pathetic."

Megan said with a sudden eager warmth:

"That's true—that's awfully true. The same thing happened after Betty—died. Mum had bought some stockings for her as a present—bought them the very day it happened. Poor mum, she was all broken up. I found her crying over them. She kept saying: 'I bought them for Betty—I bought them for Betty—and she never even saw them.' "

Her own voice quivered a little. She leaned forward, looking straight at Franklin Clarke. There was between them a sudden sympathy—a fraternity in trouble.

"I know," he said. "I know exactly. Those are just the sort of things that are hell to remember."

Donald Fraser stirred uneasily.

Thora Grey diverted the conversation.

"Aren't we going to make any plans—for the future?" she asked.

"Of course." Franklin Clarke resumed his ordinary manner. "I think that when the moment comes—that is, when the fourth letter arrives—we ought to join forces. Until then, perhaps we might each try our luck on our own. I don't know whether there are any points M. Poirot thinks might repay investigation?"

"I could make some suggestions," said Poirot.

"Good. I'll take them down." He produced a notebook. "Go ahead, M. Poirot. A—?"

"I consider it just possible that the waitress, Milly Higley, might know something useful."

"A—Milly Higley," wrote down Franklin Clarke.

"I suggest two methods of approach. You, Miss Barnard, might try what I call the offensive approach."

"I suppose you think that suits my style?" said Megan dryly.

"Pick a quarrel with the girl—say you knew she never liked your sister—and that your sister had told you all about *her.* If I do not err, that will provoke a flood of recrimination. She will tell you just what she thought of your sister! Some useful fact may emerge."

"And the second method?"

"May I suggest, Mr. Fraser, that you should show signs of interest in the girl?"

"Is that necessary?"

"No, it is not necessary. It is just a possible line of exploration."

"Shall I try my hand?" asked Franklin. "I've—er—a pretty wide experience, M. Poirot. Let me see what I can do with the young lady."

"You've got your own part of the world to attend to," said Thora Grey rather sharply.

Franklin's face fell just a little.

"Yes," he said. "I have."

"Tout de même, I do not think there is much you can do down there for the present," said Poirot. "Mademoiselle Grey now, she is far more fitted—"

Thora Grey interrupted him.

"But you see, M. Poirot, I have left Devon for good."

"Ah? I did not understand."

"Miss Grey very kindly stayed on to help me clear up things," said Franklin. "But naturally she prefers a post in London."

Poirot directed a sharp glance from one to the other.

"How is Lady Clarke?" he demanded.

I was admiring the faint colour in Thora Grey's cheeks and almost missed Clarke's reply.

"Pretty bad. By the way, M. Poirot, I wonder if you could see your way to running down to Devon and paying her a visit? She expressed a desire to see you before I left. Of course, she often can't see people for a couple of days at a time, but if you would risk that—at my expense, of course."

"Certainly, Mr. Clarke. Shall we say, the day after to-morrow?"

"Good. I'll let nurse know and she'll arrange the dope accordingly."

"For you, my child," said Poirot, turning to Mary, "I think you might perhaps do good work in Andover. Try the children."

"The children?"

"Yes. Children will not chat readily to outsiders. But you are known in the street where your aunt lived. There were a good many children playing about. They may have noticed who went in and out of your aunt's shop."

"What about Miss Grey and myself?" asked Clarke. "That is, if I'm not to go to Bexhill."

"M. Poirot," said Thora Grey. "What was the postmark on the third letter?"

"Putney, mademoiselle."

She said thoughtfully: "S.W.15, Putney, that is right, is it not?"

"For a wonder, the newspaper printed it correctly."

"That seems to point to A.B.C. being a Londoner."

"On the face of it, yes."

"One ought to be able to draw him," said Clarke. "M. Poirot, how would it be if I inserted an advertisement—something after these lines: *A.B.C. Urgent. H.P. close on your track. A hundred for my silence. X.Y.Z.* Nothing quite so crude as that—but you see the idea. It might draw him."

"It is a possibility—yes."

"Might induce him to try and have a shot at me."

"I think it's very dangerous and silly," said Thora Grey sharply.

"What about it, M. Poirot?"

"It can do no harm to try. I think myself that A.B.C. will be too cunning to reply." Poirot smiled a little. "I see, Mr. Clarke, that you are—if I may say so without being offensive—still a boy at heart."

Franklin Clarke looked a little abashed.

"Well," he said, consulting his notebook, "we're making a start.

A.—Miss Barnard and Milly Higley.
B.—Mr. Fraser and Miss Higley.
C.—Children in Andover.
D.—Advertisement.

I don't feel any of it is much good, but it will be something to do whilst waiting."

He got up and a few minutes later the meeting had dispersed.

CHAPTER XIX

BY WAY OF SWEDEN

POIROT returned to his seat and sat humming a little tune to himself.

"Unfortunate that she is so intelligent," he murmured.

"Who?"

"Megan Barnard. Mademoiselle Megan. 'Words,' she snaps out. At once she perceives that what I am saying means nothing at all. Everybody else was taken in."

"I thought it sounded very plausible."

"Plausible, yes. It was just that she perceived."

"Didn't you mean what you said, then?"

"What I said could have been comprised into one short sentence. Instead I repeated myself *ad lib.* without any one but Mademoiselle Megan being aware of the fact."

"But why?"

"Eh bien—to get things going! To imbue every one with the impression that there was work to be done! To start—shall we say—the conversations!"

"Don't you think any of these lines will lead to anything?"

"Oh, it is always possible."

He chuckled.

"In the midst of tragedy we start the comedy. It is so, is it not?"

"What *do* you mean?"

"The human drama, Hastings! Reflect a little minute. Here are three sets of human beings brought together by a common tragedy. Immediately a second drama commences—*tout à fait à part.* Do you remember my first case in England? Oh, so many years ago now. I brought together two people who loved one another—by the simple method of having one of them arrested for murder! Nothing less would have done it! In the midst of death we are in life, Hastings. . . . Murder, I have often noticed, is a great matchmaker."

"Really, Poirot," I cried, scandalized. "I'm sure none of those people was thinking of anything but—"

"Oh! my dear friend. And what about yourself?"

"I?"

"Mais oui, as they departed, did you not come back from the door humming a tune?"

"One may do that without being callous."

"Certainly, but that tune told me your thoughts."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. To hum a tune is extremely dangerous. It reveals the sub-conscious mind. The tune you hummed dates, I think, from the days of the war. *Comme ça,"* Poirot sang in an abominable falsetto voice:

"Some of the time I love a brunette,
Some of the time I love a blonde (who comes
from Eden by way of Sweden).

"What could be more revealing? *Mais je crois que la blonde l'emporte sur la brunette!"*

"Really, Poirot," I cried, blushing slightly.

"C'est tout naturel. Did you observe how Franklin Clarke was suddenly at one and in sympathy with Mademoiselle Megan? How he leaned forward and looked at her? And did you also notice how very much annoyed Mademoiselle Thora Grey was about it? And Mr. Donald Fraser, he—"

"Poirot," I said, "your mind is incurably sentimental."

"That is the last thing my mind is. You are the sentimental one, Hastings."

I was about to argue the point hotly, but at that moment the door opened.

To my astonishment it was Thora Grey who entered.

"Forgive me for coming back," she said composedly. "But there was something that I think I would like to tell you, M. Poirot."

"Certainly, mademoiselle. Sit down, will you not?"

She took a seat and hesitated for just a minute as though choosing her words.

"It is just this, M. Poirot. Mr. Clarke very generously gave you to understand just now that I had left Combeside by my own wish. He is a very kind and loyal person. But as a matter of fact, it is not quite like that. I was quite prepared to stay on—there is any amount of work to be done in connection with the collections. It was Lady Clarke who wished me to leave! I can make allowances. She is a very ill woman, and her brain is somewhat muddled with the drugs they give her. It makes her suspicious and fanciful. She took an unreasoning dislike to me and insisted that I should leave the house."

I could not but admire the girl's courage. She did not attempt to gloss over facts, as so many might have been tempted to do, but went straight to the point with an admirable candour. My heart went out to her in admiration and sympathy.

"I call it splendid of you to come and tell us this," I said.

"It's always better to have the truth," she said with a little smile. "I don't want to shelter behind Mr. Clarke's chivalry. He is a very chivalrous man."

There was a warm glow in her words. She evidently admired Franklin Clarke enormously.

"You have been very honest, mademoiselle," said Poirot.

"It is rather a blow to me," said Thora ruefully. "I had no idea Lady Clarke dislike me so much. In fact, I always thought she was rather fond of me." She made a wry face. "One lives and learns."

She rose.

"That is all I came to say. Good-bye."

I accompanied her downstairs.

"I call that very sporting of her," I said as I returned to the room. "She has courage, that girl."

"And calculation."

"What do you mean—calculation?"

"I mean that she has the power of looking ahead."

I looked at him doubtfully.

"She really is a lovely girl," I said.

"And wears very lovely clothes. That crepe marocain and the silky fox collar—*dernier cri!*"

"You're a man milliner, Poirot. I never notice what people have on."

"You should join a nudist colony."

As I was about to make an indignant rejoinder, he said, with a sudden change of subject:

"Do you know, Hastings, I cannot rid my mind of the impression that already, in our conversations this afternoon, something was said that was significant. It is odd—I cannot pin down exactly what it was. . . . Just an impression that passed through my mind. . . . *That reminds me of something I have already heard or seen or noted. . . .*"

"Something at Churston?"

"No—not at Churston. . . . Before that. . . . No matter, presently it will come to me. . . ."

He looked at me (perhaps I had not been attending very closely), laughed and began once more to hum.

"She is an angel, is she not? From Eden, by way of Sweden. . . ."

"Poirot," I said. "Go to the devil!"

CHAPTER XX

LADY CLARKE

THERE was an air of deep and settled melancholy over Combeside when we saw it again for the second time. This may, perhaps, have been partly due to the weather—it was a moist September day with a hint of autumn in the air, and partly, no doubt, it was the semi-shut-up state of the house. The downstairs rooms were closed and shuttered, and the small room into which we were shown smelt damp and airless.

A capable-looking hospital nurse came to us there pulling down her starched cuffs.

"M. Poirot?" she said briskly. "I am Nurse Capstick I got Mr. Clarke's letter saying you were coming."

Poirot inquired after Lady Clarke's health.

"Not at all bad really, all things considered."

"All things considered," I presumed meant considering she was under sentence of death.

"One can't hope for much improvement, of course, but some new treatment has made things a little easier for her. Dr. Logan is quite pleased with her condition."

"But it is true, is it not, that she can never recover?"

"Oh, we never actually *say* that," said Nurse Capstick, a little shocked by this plain speaking.

"I suppose her husband's death was a terrible shock to her?"

"Well, M. Poirot, if you understand what I mean, it wasn't as much of a shock as it would have been to any one in full possession of her health and faculties. Things are *dimmed* for Lady Clarke in her condition."

"Pardon my asking, but was she deeply attached to her husband and he to her?"

"Oh, yes, they were a very happy couple. He was very worried and upset about her, poor man. It's always worse for a doctor, you know. They can't buoy themselves up with false hopes. I'm afraid it preyed on his mind very much to begin with."

"To begin with? Not so much afterwards?"

"One gets used to everything, doesn't one? And then Sir Carmichael had his collection. A hobby is a great consolation to a man. He used to run up to sales occasionally, and then he and Miss Grey were busy recataloguing and rearranging the museum on a new system."

"Oh, yes—Miss Grey. She has left, has she not?"

"Yes—I'm very sorry about it—but ladies do take these fancies sometimes when they're not well. And there's no arguing with them. It's better to give in. Miss Grey was very sensible about it."

"Has Lady Clarke always disliked her?"

"No—that is to say, not *disliked.* As a matter of fact, I think she rather liked her to begin with. But there, I mustn't keep you gossiping. My patient will be wondering what has become of us."

She led us upstairs to a room on the first floor. What had at one time been a bedroom had been turned into a cheerful-looking sitting-room.

Lady Clarke was sitting in a big arm-chair near the window. She was painfully thin, and her face had the grey, haggard look of one who suffers much pain. She had a slightly far-away, dreamy look, and I noticed that the pupils of her eyes were mere pin-points.

"This is M. Poirot whom you wanted to see," said Nurse Capstick in her high, cheerful voice.

"Oh, yes, M. Poirot," said Lady Clarke vaguely.

She extended her hand.

"My friend Captain Hastings, Lady Clarke."

"How do you do? So good of you both to come."

We sat down as her vague gesture directed. There was a silence. Lady Clarke seemed to have lapsed into a dream.

Presently with a slight effort she roused herself.

"It was about Car, wasn't it? About Car's death. Oh, yes."

She sighed, but still in a far-away manner, shaking her head.

"We never thought it would be that way round . . . I was so sure I should be the first to go. . . ." She mused a minute or two. "Car was very strong—wonderful for his age. He was never ill. He was nearly sixty—but he seemed more like fifty. . . . Yes, very strong. . . ."

She relapsed again into her dream. Poirot, who was well acquainted with the effects of certain drugs and of how they give their taker the impression of endless time, said nothing.

Lady Clarke said suddenly:

"Yes—it was good of you to come. I told Franklin. He said he wouldn't forget to tell you. I hope Franklin isn't going to be foolish . . . he's so easily taken in, in spite of having knocked about the world so much. Men are like that. . . . They remain boys . . . Franklin, in particular."

"He has an impulsive nature," said Poirot.

"Yes—yes. . . . And very chivalrous. Men are so foolish that way. Even Car—" Her voice tailed off.

She shook her head with a febrile impatience.

"Everything's so dim. . . . One's body is a nuisance, M. Poirot, especially when it gets the upper hand. One is conscious of nothing else—whether the pain will hold off or not—nothing else seems to matter."

"I know, Lady Clarke. It is one of the tragedies of this life."

"It makes me so stupid. I cannot even remember what it was I wanted to say to you."

"Was it something about your husband's death?"

"Car's death? Yes, perhaps. . . . Mad, poor creature—the murderer, I mean. It's all the noise and the speed nowadays—people can't stand it. I've always been sorry for mad people—their heads must feel so queer. And then, being shut up—it must be so terrible. But what else can one do? If they kill people . . ." She shook her head—gently pained. "You haven't caught him yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet."

"He must have been hanging round here that day."

"There were so many strangers about, Lady Clarke. It is the holiday season."

"Yes—I forgot. . . . But they keep down by the beaches, they don't come up near the house."

"No stranger came to the house that day."

"Who says so?" demanded Lady Clarke, with a sudden vigour.

Poirot looked slightly taken aback.

"The servants," he said. "Miss Grey."

Lady Clarke said very distinctly:

"That girl is a liar!"

I started on my chair. Poirot threw me a glance.

Lady Clarke was going on, speaking now rather feverishly.

"I didn't like her. I never liked her. Car thought all the world of her. Used to go on about her being an orphan and alone in the world. What's wrong with being an orphan? Sometimes it's a blessing in disguise. You might have a good-for-nothing father and a mother who drank—then you would have something to complain about. Said she was so brave and such a good worker. I dare say she did her work well! I don't know where all this bravery came in!"

"Now don't excite yourself, dear," said Nurse Capstick, intervening. "We mustn't have you getting tired."

"I soon sent her packing! Franklin had the impertinence to suggest that she might be a comfort to me. Comfort to me indeed! The sooner I saw the last of her the better—that's what I said! Franklin's a fool! I didn't want him getting mixed up with her. He's a boy! No sense! 'I'll give her three months' salary, if you like,' I said. 'But out she goes. I don't want her in the house a day longer.' There's one thing about being ill—men can't argue with you. He did what I said and she went. Went like a martyr, I expect—with more sweetness and bravery!"

"Now, dear, don't get so excited. It's bad for you."

"Lady Clarke waved Nurse Capstick away.

"You were as much of a fool about her as any one else."

"Oh! Lady Clarke, you mustn't say that. I did think Miss Grey a very nice girl—so romantic-looking, like some one out of a novel."

"I've no patience with the lot of you," said Lady Clarke feebly.

"Well, she's gone now, my dear. Gone right away."

Lady Clarke shook her head with feeble impatience but she did not answer.

Poirot said:

"Why did you say that Miss Grey was a liar?"

"Because she is. She told you no strangers came to the house, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then. I saw her—with my own eyes—out of this window—talking to a perfectly strange man on the front doorstep."

"When was this?"

"In the morning of the day Car died—about eleven o'clock."

"What did this man look like?"

"An ordinary sort of man. Nothing special."

"A gentleman—or a tradesman?"

"Not a tradesman. A shabby sort of person. I can't remember."

A sudden quiver of pain shot across her face.

"Please—you must go now—I'm a little tired—Nurse."

We obeyed the cue and took our departure.

"That's an extraordinary story," I said to Poirot as we journeyed back to London. "About Miss Grey and a strange man."

"You see, Hastings? It is, as I tell you: *there is always something to be found out.*"

"Why did the girl lie about it and say she had seen no one?"

"I can think of seven separate reasons—one of them an extremely simple one."

"Is that a snub?" I asked.

"It is, perhaps, an invitation to use your ingenuity. But there is no need for us to perturb ourselves. The easiest way to answer the question is to ask her."

"And suppose she tells us another lie."

"That would indeed be interesting—and highly suggestive."

"It is monsterous to suppose that a girl like that could be in league with a madman."

"Precisely—so I do not suppose it."

I thought for some minutes longer.

"A good-looking girl has a hard time of it," I said at last with a sigh.

"Du tout. Disabuse your mind of that idea."

"It's true," I insisted. "Every one's hand is against her simply because she is good-looking."

"You speak the *bêtises,* my friend. Whose hand was against her at Combeside? Sir Carmichael's? Franklin's? Nurse Capstick's?"

"Lady Clarke was down on her, all right."

"Mon ami, you are full of charitable feelings towards beautiful young girls. Me, I feel charitable to sick old ladies. It may be that Lady Clarke was the clear-sighted one—and that her husband, Mr. Franklin Clarke and Nurse Capstick were all as blind as bats—and Captain Hastings.

"Realize, Hastings, that in the ordinary course of events *those three separate dramas would never have touched each other.* They would have pursued their course uninfluenced by each other. The permutations and combinations of life, Hastings—I never cease to be fascinated by them."

"This is Paddington," was the only answer I made.

It was time, I felt, that some one pricked the bubble.

On our arrival at Whitehaven Mansions we were told that a gentleman was waiting to see Poirot.

I expected it to be Franklin, or perhaps Japp, but to my astonishment it turned out to be none other than Donald Fraser.

He seemed very embarrassed and his inarticulateness was more noticeable than ever.

Poirot did not press him to come to the point of his visit, but instead suggested sandwiches and a glass of wine.

Until these made their appearance he monopolized the conversation, explaining where we had been, and speaking with kindliness and feeling of the invalid woman.

Not until we were finished the sandwiches and sipping the wine did he give the conversation a personal turn.

"You have come from Bexhill, Mr. Fraser?"

"Yes."

"Any success with Milly Higley?"

"Milly Higley? Milly Higley?" Fraser repeated the name wonderingly. "Oh, that girl! No, I haven't done anything there yet. It's—"

He stopped. His hands twisted themselves together nervously.

"I don't know why I've come to you," he burst out.

"I know," said Poirot.

"You can't. How can you?"

"You have come to me because there is something that you must tell to some one. You were quite right. I am the proper person. Speak!"

Poirot's air of assurance had its effect. Fraser looked at him with a queer air of grateful obedience.

"You think so?"

"Parbleu, I am sure of it."

"M. Poirot, do you know anything about dreams?"

It was the last thing I had expected him to say.

Poirot, however, seemed in no wise surprised.

"I do," he replied. "You have been dreaming—?"

"Yes. I suppose you'll say it's only natural that I should—should dream about—It. But it isn't an ordinary dream."

"No?"

"I've dreamed it now three nights running, sir. . . . I think I'm going mad. . . ."

"Tell me—"

The man's face was livid. His eyes were starting out of his head. As a matter of fact, he *looked* mad.

"It's always the same. I'm on the beach. Looking for Betty. She's lost—only lost, you understand. I've got to find her. I've got to give her her belt. I'm carrying it in my hand. And then—"

"Yes?"

"The dream changes . . . I'm not looking any more. She's there in front of me—sitting on the beach. She doesn't see me coming— It's—oh, I can't—"

"Go on."

Poirot's voice was authoritative—firm.

"I come up behind her . . . she doesn't hear me . . . I slip the belt round her neck and pull—oh—pull. . . ."

The agony in his voice was frightful . . . I gripped the arms of my chair. . . . The thing was too real.

"She's chocking . . . she's dead . . . I've strangled her—and then her head falls back and I see her face . . . and it's *Megan*—not Betty!"

He leant back white and shaking. Poirot poured out another glass of wine and passed it over to him.

"What's the meaning of it, M. Poirot? Why does it come to me? Every night . . . ?"

"Drink up your wine," ordered Poirot.

The young man did so, then he asked in a calmer voice:

"What does it mean? I—I didn't kill her, did I?"

What Poirot answered I do not know, for at that minute I heard the postman's knock and automatically I left the room.

What I took out of the letter-box banished all my interest in Donald Fraser's extraordinary revelations.

I raced back into the sitting-room.

"Poirot," I cried. "It's come. The fourth letter."

He sprang up, seized it from me, caught up his paper-knife and split it open. He spread it out on the table.

The three of us read it together.

Still no success? Fie! Fie! What are you and the police doing? Well, well, isn't this fun? And where shall we go next for honey?

Poor Mr. Poirot. I'm quite sorry for you.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.

We've a long way to go still.

Tipperary? No—that comes farther on. Letter T.

The next little incident will take place at Doncaster on September 11th.

So long.

A.B.C.

CHAPTER XXI

DESCRIPTION OF A MURDERER

IT WAS at this moment, I think, that what Poirot called the human element began to fade out of the picture again. It was as though, the mind being unable to stand unadulterated horror, we had had an interval of normal human interests.

We had, one and all, felt the impossibility of doing anything until the fourth letter should come revealing the projected scene of the D murder. That atmosphere of waiting had brought a release of tension.

But now, with the printed words jeering from the white stiff paper, the hunt was up once more.

Inspector Crome had come round from the Yard, and while he was still there, Franklin Clarke and Megan Barnard came in.

The girl explained that she, too, had come up from Bexhill.

"I wanted to ask Mr. Clarke something."

She seemed rather anxious to excuse and explain her procedure. I just noted the fact without attaching much importance to it.

The letter naturally filled my mind to the exclusion of all else.

Crome, was not, I think, any too pleased to see the various participants in the drama. He became extremely official and non-committal.

"I'll take this with me, M. Poirot. If you care to take a copy of it—"

"No, no, it is not necessary."

"What are your plans, inspector?" asked Clarke.

"Fairly comprehensive ones, Mr. Clarke."

"This time we've got to get him," said Clarke. "I may tell you, inspector, that we've formed an association of our own to deal with the matter. A legion of interested parties."

Inspector Crome said in his best manner:

"Oh, yes?"

"I gather you don't think much of amateurs, inspector?"

"You've hardly the same resources at your command, have you, Mr. Clarke?"

"We've got a personal axe to grind—and that's something."

"Oh, yes?"

"I fancy your own task isn't going to be too easy, inspector. In fact, I rather fancy old A.B.C. has done you again."

Crome, I had noticed, could often be goaded into speech when other methods would have failed.

"I don't fancy the public will have much to criticise in our arrangements this time," he said. "The fool has given us ample warning this time. The 11th isn't till Wednesday of next week. That gives ample time for a publicity campaign in the press. Doncaster will be thoroughly warned. Every soul whose name begins with a D will be on his or her guard—that's so much to the good. Also, we'll draft police into the town on a fairly large scale. That's already been arranged for by consent of all the Chief Constables in England. The whole of Doncaster, police and civilians, will be out to catch one man—and with reasonable luck, we ought to get him!"

Clarke said quietly:

"It's easy to see you're not a sporting man, inspector."

Crome stared at him.

"What do you mean, Mr. Clarke?"

"Man alive, don't you realize that on *next Wednesday the St. Leger is being run at Doncaster?"*

The inspector's jaw dropped. For the life of him he could not bring out the familiar "Oh, yes?" Instead he said:

"That's true. Yes, that complicates matters. . . ."

"A.B.C. is no fool, even if he *is* a madman."

We were all silent for a minute or two, taking in the situation. The crowds on the race-course—the passionate, sport-loving English public—the endless complications.

Poirot murmured:

"C'est ingénieux. Tout de même c'est bien imaginé, ça."

"It's my belief," said Clarke, "that the murder will take place on the race-course—perhaps actually while the Leger is being run."

For the moment his sporting instincts took a momentary pleasure in the thought. . . .

Inspector Crome rose, taking the letter with him.

"The St. Leger is a complication," he allowed. "It's unfortunate."

He went out. We heard a murmur of voices in the hallway. A minute later Thora Grey entered.

She said anxiously:

"The inspector told me there is another letter. Where this time?"

It was raining outside. Thora Grey was wearing a black coat and skirt and furs. A little black hat just perched itself on the side of her golden head.

It was to Franklin Clarke that she spoke and she came right up to him and, with a hand on his arm, waited for his answer.

"Doncaster—and on the day of the St. Leger."

We settled down to a discussion. It went without saying that we all intended to be present, but the race-meeting undoubtedly complicated the plans we had made tentatively beforehand.

A feeling of discouragement swept over me. What could this little band of six people do, after all, however strong their personal interest in the matter might be? There would be innumerable police, keen-eyed and alert, watching all likely spots. What could six more pairs of eyes do?

As though in answer to my thought, Poirot raised his voice. He spoke rather like a schoolmaster or a priest.

"Mes enfants," he said, "we must not disperse the strength. We must approach this matter with method and order in our thoughts. We must look within and not without for the truth. We must say to ourselves—each one of us—what do *I* know about the murderer? And so we must build up a composite picture of the man we are going to seek."

"We know nothing about him," sighed Thora Grey helplessly.

"No, no, mademoiselle. That is not true. Each one of us knows something about him—*if we only knew what it is we know. I am convinced that the knowledge is there* if we could only get at it."

Clarke shook his head.

"We don't know anything—whether he's old or young, fair or dark! None of us has ever seen him or spoken to him! We've gone over everything we all know again and again."

"Not everything! For instance, Miss Grey here told us that she did not see or speak to any stranger on the day that Sir Carmichael Clarke was murdered."

Thora Grey nodded.

"That's quite right."

"Is it? *Lady Clarke told us, mademoiselle, that from her window she saw you standing on the front door step talking to a man."*

"She saw *me* talking to a strange man?" The girl seemed genuinely astonished. Surely that pure, limpid look could not be anything but genuine.

She shook her head.

"Lady Clarke must have made a mistake. I never—Oh!"

The exclamation came suddenly—jerked out of her. A crimson wave flooded her cheeks.

"I remember now! How stupid! I'd forgotten all about it. But it wasn't important. Just one of those men who come round selling stockings—you know, ex-Army people. They're very persistent. I had to get rid of him. I was just crossing the hall when he came to the door. He spoke to me instead of ringing but he was quite a harmless sort of person. I suppose that's why I forgot about him."

Poirot was swaying to and fro, his hands clasped to his head. He was muttering to himself with such vehemence that nobody else said anything, but stared at him instead.

"Stockings," he was murmuring. "Stockings . . . stockings . . . stockings . . . *ça vient* . . . stockings . . . stockings . . . It is the *motif*—yes . . . three months ago . . . and the other day . . . and now. *Bon Dieu,* I have it!"

He sat upright and fixed me with an imperious eye.

"You remember, Hastings? Andover. The shop. We go upstairs. The bedroom. On a chair. *A pair of new silk stockings.* And now I know what it was that roused my attention two days ago. It was you, mademoiselle—" He turned on Megan. "You spoke of your mother who wept *because she had bought your sister some new stockings on the very day of the murder. . . .*"

He looked round on us all.

"You see? *It is the same motif* three times repeated. That cannot be coincidence. When mademoiselle spoke I had the feeling that what she said linked up with something. I know now with what. The words spoken by Mrs. Ascher's next-door neighbour, Mrs. Fowler. About people who were always trying to *sell* you things—and she mentioned *stockings.* Tell me, mademoiselle, it is true, is it not, that your mother bought those stockings, not at a shop, but from some one who came to the door?"

"Yes—yes—she did . . . I remember now. She said something about being sorry for these wretched men who go round and try to get orders."

"But what's the connection?" cried Franklin. "That a man came selling stockings proved nothing?"

"I tell you, my friends, it *cannot* be coincidence. Three crimes—and every time a man selling stockings and spying out the land."

He wheeled round on Thora.

"A vous la parole! Describe this man."

She looked at him blankly.

"I can't . . . I don't know how. . . . He had glasses, I think . . . and a shabby overcoat. . . ."

"Mieux que ça, mademoiselle."

"He stooped . . . I don't know. I hardly looked at him. He wasn't the sort of man you'd notice. . . ."

Poirot said gravely:

"You are quite right, mademoiselle. The whole secret of the murders lies there in your description of the murderer—for without a doubt he *was* the murderer! '*He wasn't the sort of man you'd notice.*' Yes—there is no doubt about it. . . . You have described the murderer!"

CHAPTER XXII

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

MR. ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST sat very still. His breakfast lay cold and untasted on his plate. A newspaper was propped up against the teapot and it was this newspaper that Mr. Cust was reading with avid interest.

Suddenly he got up, paced to and fro for a minute, then sank into a chair by the window. He buried his head in his hands with a stifled groan.

He did not hear the sound of the opening door. His landlady, Mrs. Marbury, stood in the doorway.

"I was wondering, Mr. Cust, if you'd fancy a nice—why, whatever is it? Aren't you feeling well?"

Mr. Cust raised his head from his hands.

"Nothing. It's nothing at all, Mrs. Marbury. I'm not—feeling very well this morning."

Mrs. Marbury inspected the breakfast tray.

"So I see. You haven't touched your breakfast. Is it your head troubling you again?"

"No. At least, yes . . . I—I just feel a bit out of sorts."

"Well, I'm sorry, I'm sure. You'll not be going away to-day then?"

Mr. Cust sprang up abruptly.

"No, no. I have to go. It's business. Important. Very important."

His hands were shaking. Seeing him so agitated, Mrs. Marbury tried to soothe him.

"Well, if you must—you must. Going far this time?"

"No. I'm going to"—he hesitated for a minute or two—"Cheltenham."

There was something so peculiar about the tentative way he said the word that Mrs. Marbury looked at him in surprise.

"Cheltenham's a nice place," she said conversationally. "I went there from Bristol one year. The shops are ever so nice."

"I suppose so—yes."

Mrs. Marbury stooped rather stiffly—for stooping did not suit her figure—to pick up the paper that was lying crumpled on the floor.

"Nothing but this murdering business in the papers nowadays," she said as she glanced at the headlines before putting it back on the table. "Gives me the creeps, it does. I don't read it. It's like Jack the Ripper all over again."

Mr. Cust's lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Doncaster—that's the place he's going to do his next murder," said Mrs.Marbury. "And to-morrow! Fairly makes your flesh creep, doesn't it? If I lived in Doncaster and my name began with a D, I'd take the first train away, that I would. I'd run no risks. What did you say, Mr. Cust?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Marbury—nothing."

"It's the races and all. No doubt he thinks he'll get his opportunity there. Hundreds of police, they say, they're drafting in and— Why, Mr. Cust, you *do* look bad. Hadn't you better have a little drop of something? Really, now, you oughtn't to go travelling to-day."

Mr. Cust drew himself up.

"It is necessary, Mrs. Marbury. I have always been punctual in my—engagements. People must have—must have confidence in you! When I have undertaken to do a thing, I carry it through. It is the only way to get on in—in—business."

"But if you're ill?"

"I am not ill, Mrs. Marbury. Just a little worried over—various personal matters. I slept badly. I am really quite all right."

His manner was so firm that Mrs. Marbury gathered up the breakfast things and reluctantly left the room.

Mr. Cust dragged out a suitcase from under the bed and began to pack. Pyjamas, sponge-bag, spare collar, leather slippers. Then unlocking a cupboard, he transferred a dozen or so flattish cardboard boxes about ten inches by seven from a shelf to the suitcase.

He just glanced at the railway guide on the table and then left the room, suitcase in hand.

Setting it down in the hall, he put on his hat and overcoat. As he did so he sighed deeply, so deeply that that the girl who came out from a room at the side looked at him in concern.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Cust?"

"Nothing, Miss Lily."

"You were sighing so!"

Mr. Cust said abruptly:

"Are you at all subject to premonitions, Miss Lily? To presentiments?"

"Well, I don't know that I am, really. . . . Of course, there are days when you just feel everything's going wrong, and days when you feel everything's going right."

"Quite," said Mr. Cust.

He sighed again.

"Well, good-bye, Miss Lily. Good-bye. I'm sure you've been very kind to me always here."

"Well, don't say good-bye as though you were going away for ever," laughed Lily.

"No, no, of course not."

"See you Friday," laughed the girl. "Where are you going this time? Seaside again?"

"No, no—er—Cheltenham."

"Well, that's nice, too. But not quite as nice as Torquay. That must have been lovely. I want to go there for my holiday next year. By the way, you must have been quite near where the murder was—the A.B.C. murder. It happened while you were down there, didn't it?"

"Er—yes. But Churston's six or seven miles away."

"All the same, it must have been exciting! Why, you may have passed the murderer in the street! You may have been quite near to him!"

"Yes, I may, of course," said Mr. Cust with such a ghastly and contorted smile that Lily Marbury noticed it.

"Oh, Mr. Cust, you *don't* look well."

"I'm quite all right, quite all right. Good-bye, Miss Marbury."

He fumbled to raise his hat, caught up his suitcase and fairly hastened out of the front door.

"Funny old thing," said Lily Marbury indulgently. "Looks half batty to my mind."

Inspector Crome said to his subordinate:

"Get me out a list of all stocking manufacturing firms and circularize them. I want a list of all their agents—you know, fellows who sell on commission and tout for orders."

"This the A.B.C. case, sir?"

"Yes. One of Mr. Hercule Poirot's ideas." The inspector's tone was disdainful. "Probably nothing in it, but it doesn't do to neglect any chance, however faint."

"Right, sir. Mr. Poirot's done some good stuff in his time, but I think he's a bit ga ga now, sir."

"He's a mountebank," said Inspector Crome. "Always posing. Takes in some people. It doesn't take in *me*. Now then, about the arrangement for Doncaster. . . ."

Tom Hartigan said to Lily Marbury:

"Saw your old dugout this morning."

"Who? Mr. Cust?"

"Cust it was. At Euston. Looking like a lost hen, as usual. I think the fellow's half a loony. He needs some one to look after him. First he dropped his paper and then he dropped his ticket. I picked that up—he hadn't the faintest idea he'd lost it. Thanked me in an agitated sort of manner, but I don't think he recognized me."

"Oh, well," said Lily. "He's only seen you passing in the hall, and not very often at that."

They danced once round the floor.

"You dance something beautiful," said Tom.

"Go on," said Lily and wriggled yet a little closer.

They danced round again.

"Did you say Euston or Paddington?" asked Lily abruptly. "Where you saw old Cust, I mean?"

"Euston."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. What do you think?"

"Funny. I thought you went to Cheltenham from Paddington."

"So you do. But old Cust wasn't going to Cheltenham. He was going to Doncaster."

"Cheltenham."

"Doncaster. I know, my girl! After all, I picked up his ticket, didn't I?"

"Well, he told *me* he was going to Cheltenham. I'm sure he did."

"Oh, you've got it wrong. He was going to Doncaster all right. Some people have all the luck. I've got a bit on Firefly for the Leger and I'd love to see it run."

"I shouldn't think Mr. Cust went to race-meetings; he doesn't look the kind. Oh, Tom. I hope he won't get murdered. It's Doncaster the A.B.C. murder's going to be."

"Cust'll be all right. His name doesn't begin with a D."

"He might have been murdered last time. He was down near Churston at Torquay when the last murder happened."

"Was he? That's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it?"

He laughed.

"He wasn't at Bexhill the time before, was he?"

Lily crinkled her brows.

"He was away. . . . Yes, I remember he was away. . . . because he forgot his bathing-dress. Mother was mending it for him. And she said: 'There—Mr. Cust went away yesterday without his bathing-dress after all,' and I said: 'Oh, never mind the old bathing-dress—there's been the most awful murder,' I said, 'a girl strangled at Bexhill.' "

"Well, if he wanted his bathing-dress, he must have been going to the seaside. I say, Lily"—his face crinkled up with amusement. "What price your old dugout being the murderer himself?"

"Poor Mr. Cust? He wouldn't hurt a fly," laughed Lily.

They danced on happily—in their conscious minds nothing but the pleasure of being together.

In their unconscious minds something stirred. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

SEPTEMBER 11TH. DONCASTER

DONCASTER!

I shall, I think, remember that 11th of September all my life.

Indeed, whenever I see a mention of the St. Leger my mind flies automatically not to horse-racing but to murder.

When I recall my own sensations, the thing that stands out most is a sickening sense of insufficiency. We were here—on the spot—Poirot, myself, Clarke, Fraser, Megan Barnard, Thora Grey and Mary Drower, and in the last resort *what could any of us do?*

We were building on a forlorn hope—on the chance of recognizing amongst a crowd of thousands of people a face or figure imperfectly seen on an occasion one, two or three months back.

The odds were in reality greater than that. Of us all, the only person likely to make such a recognition was Thora Grey.

Some of her serenity had broken down under the strain. Her calm, efficient manner was gone. She sat twisting her hands together, almost weeping, appealing incoherently to Poirot.

"I never really looked at him. . . . Why didn't I? What a fool I was. You're depending on me, all of you . . . and I shall let you down. Because even if I did see him again I mightn't recognize him. I've got a bad memory for faces."

Poirot, whatever he might say to me, and however harshly he might seem to criticize the girl, showed nothing but kindness now. His manner was tender in the extreme. It struck me that Poirot was no more indifferent to beauty in distress than I was.

He patted her shoulder kindly.

"Now then, *petite,* not the hysteria. We cannot have that. If you should see this man you would recognize him."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, a great many reasons—for one, because the red succeeds the black."

"What do you mean, Poirot?" I cried.

"I speak the language of the tables. At roulette there may be a long run on the black—but in the end *red must turn up.* It is the mathematical laws of chance."

"You mean that luck turns?"

"Exactly, Hastings. And that is where the gambler (and the murderer, who is, after all, only a supreme kind of gambler since what he risks is not his money but his life) often lacks intelligent anticipation. Because he *has* won he thinks he will *continue* to win! He does not leave the tables in good time with his pockets full. So in crime the murderer who is successful *cannot conceive the possibility of not being successful!* He takes to *himself* all the credit for a successful performance—but I tell you, my friends, however carefully planned, no crime can be successful without luck!"

"Isn't that going rather far?" demurred Franklin Clarke.

Poirot waved his hands excitedly.

"No, no. It is an even chance, if you like, but it *must* be in your favour. Consider! It might have happened that some one enters Mrs. Ascher's shop just as the murderer is leaving. That person might have thought of looking behind the counter, have seen the dead woman—and either laid hands on the murderer straight away or else been able to give such an accurate description of him to the police that he would have been arrested forthwith."

"Yes, of course, that's possible," admitted Clarke. "What it comes to is that a murderer's got to take a chance."

"Precisely. A murderer is always a gambler. And, like many gamblers, a murderer often does not know when to stop. With each crime his opinion of his own abilities is strengthened. His sense of proportion is warped. He does not say, 'I have been clever *and lucky!*' No, he says only, 'I have been clever!' And his opinion of his cleverness grows . . . and then, *mes amis,* the ball spins, and the run of colour is over—it drops into a new number and the croupier calls out *'Rouge.'* "

"You think that will happen in this case?" asked Megan, drawing her brows together in a frown.

"It *must* happen sooner or later! So far *the luck has been with the criminal*—sooner or later it must turn and be with us. I believe that it *has* turned! The clue of the stockings is the beginning. Now, instead of everything going *right* for him, everything will go *wrong* for him! And he, too, will begin to make mistakes. . . ."

"I will say you're heartening," said Franklin Clarke. "We all need a bit of comfort. I've had a paralyzing feeling of helplessness ever since I woke up."

"It seems to me highly problematical that we can accomplish anything of practical value," said Donald Fraser.

Megan rapped out:

"Don't be a defeatest, Don."

Mary Drower, flushing up a little, said:

"What I say is, you never know. That wicked fiend's in this place, and so are we—and after all, you do run up against people in the funniest way sometimes."

I fumed:

"If only we could do something more."

"You must remember, Hastings, that the police are doing everything reasonably possible. Special constables have been enrolled. The good Inspector Crome may have the irritating manner, but he is a very able police officer, and Colonel Anderson, the Chief Constable, is a man of action. They have taken the fullest measures for watching and patrolling the town and the race-course. There will be plain-clothes men everywhere. There is also the press campaign. The public is fully warned."

Donald Fraser shook his head.

"He'll never attempt it, I'm thinking," he said more hopefully. "The man would just be mad!"

"Unfortunately," said Clarke dryly, "he is mad! What do you think, M. Poirot? Will he give it up or will he try to carry it through?"

"In my opinion the strength of his obsession is such that he *must* attempt to carry out his promise! Not to do so would be to admit failure, and that his insane egoism would never allow. That, I may say, is also Dr. Thompson's opinion. Our hope is that he may be caught in the attempt."

Donald shook his head again.

"He'll be very cunning."

Poirot glanced at his watch. We took the hint. It had been agreed that we were to make an all day session of it, patrolling as many streets as possible in the morning, and later, stationing ourselves at various likely points on the race-course.

I say "we." Of course, in my own case such a patrol was of little avail since I was never likely to have set eyes on A.B.C. However, as the idea was to separate so as to cover as wide an area as possible I had suggested that I should act as escort to one of the ladies.

Poirot had agreed—I am afraid with somewhat of a twinkle in his eye.

The girls went off to get their hats on. Donald Fraser was standing by the window looking out, apparently lost in thought.

Franklin Clarke glanced over at him, then evidently deciding that the other was too abstracted to count as a listener, he lowered his voice a little and addressed Poirot.

"Look here, M. Poirot. You went down to Churston, I know, and saw my sister-in-law. Did she say—or hint—I mean—did she suggest at all—?"

He stopped, embarrassed.

Poirot answered with a face of blank innocence that aroused my strongest suspicions.

"Comment? Did your sister-in-law say, hint or suggest—what?"

Franklin Clarke got rather red.

"Perhaps you think this isn't a time for butting in with personal things—"

"Du tout!"

"But I feel I'd like to get things quite straight."

"An admirable course."

This time I think Clarke began to suspect Poirot's bland face of concealing some inner amusement. He ploughed on rather heavily.

"My sister-in-law's an awfully nice woman—I've been very fond of her always—but of course she's been ill some time—and in that kind of illness—being given drugs and all that—one tends to—well, to *fancy* things about people!"

"Ah?"

By now there was no mistaking the twinkle in Poirot's eye.

But Franklin Clarke, absorbed in his diplomatic task, was past noticing it.

"It's about Thora—Miss Grey," he said.

"Oh, it is of Miss Grey you speak?" Poirot's tone held innocent surprise.

"Yes. Lady Clarke got certain ideas in her head. You see, Thora—Miss Grey is well, rather a good-looking girl—"

"Perhaps—yes," conceded Poirot.

"And women are, even the best of them, a bit catty about other women. Of course, Thora was invaluable to my brother—he always said she was the best secretary he ever had—and he was very fond of her, too. But it was all perfectly straight and above-board. I mean, Thora isn't the sort of girl—"

"No?" said Poirot helpfully.

"But my sister-in-law got it into her head to be—well—jealous, I suppose. Not that she ever showed anything. But after Car's death, when there was a question of Miss Grey staying on—well, Charlotte cut up rough. Of course, it's partly the illness and the morphia and all that—Nurse Capstick says so—she says we mustn't blame Charlotte for getting these ideas into her head—"

He paused.

"Yes?"

"What I want you to understand, M. Poirot, is that there isn't anything in it at all. It's just a sick woman's imaginings. Look here"—he fumbled in his pocket—"here's a letter I received from my brother when I was in the Malay States. I'd like you to read it because it shows exactly what terms they were on."

Poirot took it. Franklin came over beside him and with a pointing finger read some of the extracts out loud.

—things go on here much as usual. Charlotte is moderately free from pain. I wish one could say more. You may remember Thora Grey? She is a dear girl and a greater comfort to me than I can tell you. I should have known what to do through this bad time but for her. Her sympathy and interest are unfailing. She has an exquisite taste and flair for beautiful things and shares my passion for Chinese art. I was indeed lucky to find her. No daughter could be a closer or more sympathetic companion. Her life had been a difficult and not always a happy one, but I am glad to feel that here she has a home and true affection.

"You see," said Franklin. *"That's* how my brother felt to her. He thought of her like a daughter. What I feel so unfair is the fact that the moment my brother is dead, his wife practically turns her out of the house! Women really are devils, M. Poirot."

"Your sister-in-law is ill and in pain, remember."

"I know. That's what I keep saying to myself. One mustn't judge her. All the same, I thought I'd show you this. I don't want you to get a false impression of Thora from anything Lady Clarke may have said."

Poirot returned the letter.

"I can assure you," he said, smiling, "that I never permit myself to get false impressions from anything any one tells me. I form my own judgments."

"Well," said Clarke, stowing away the letter, "I'm glad I showed it to you anyway. Here come the girls. We'd better be off."

As soon as we left the room, Poirot called me back.

"You are determined to accompany the expedition, Hastings?"

"Oh, yes. I shouldn't be happy staying here inactive."

"There is activity of mind as well as body, Hastings."

"Well, you're better at it than I am," I said.

"You are incontestably right, Hastings. Am I correct in supposing that you intend to be a cavalier to one of the ladies?"

"That was the idea."

"And which lady did you propose to honour with your company?"

"Well—I—er—hadn't considered yet."

"What about Miss Barnard?"

"She's rather the independent type," I demurred.

"Miss Grey?"

"Yes. She's better."

"I find you, Hastings, singularly though transparently dishonest! All along you had made up your mind to spend the day with your blonde angel!"

"Oh, really, Poirot!"

"I am sorry to upset your plans, but I must request you to give your escort elsewhere."

"Oh, all right. I think you've got a weakness for that Dutch doll of a girl."

"The person you are to escort is Mary Drower—and I must request you not to leave her."

"But, Poirot, why?"

"Because, my dear friend, her name begins with a D. We must take no chances."

I saw the justice of his remark. At first it seemed far-fetched. But then I realized that if A.B.C. had a fanatical hatred of Poirot, he might very well be keeping himself informed of Poirot's movements. And in that case the elimination of Mary Drower might strike him as a a very neat fourth stroke.

I promised to be faithful to my trust.

I went out leaving Poirot sitting in a chair near the window.

In front of him was a little roulette wheel. He spun it as I went out of the door and called after me:

"Rouge—that is a good omen, Hastings. The luck, it turns!"

CHAPTER XXIV

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

BELOW his breath Mr. Leadbetter uttered a grunt of impatience as his next-door neighbour got up and stumbled clumsily past him, dropping his hat over the seat in front, and leaning over to retrieve it.

All this at the culminating moment of *Not a Sparrow,* that all-star, thrilling drama of pathos and beauty that Mr. Leadbetter had been looking forward to seeing for a whole week.

The golden-haired heroine, played by Katherine Royal (in Mr. Leadbetter's opinion the leading film actress in the world), was just giving vent to a hoarse cry of indignation:

"Never. I would sooner starve. But I shan't starve. Remember those words: *not a sparrow falls*—"

Mr. Leadbetter moved his head irritably from right to left. People! Why on earth people couldn't wait till the *end* of a film . . . And to leave at this soul-stirring moment.

Ah, that was better. The annoying gentleman had passed on and out. Mr. Leadbetter had a full view of the screen and of Katherine Royal standing by the window in the Van Schreiner Mansion in New York.

And now she was boarding the train—the child in her arms. . . . What curious trains they had in America—not at all like English trains.

Ah, there was Steve again in his shack in the mountains. . . .

The film pursued its course to its emotional and semi-religious end.

Mr. Leadbetter breathed a sigh of satisfaction as the lights went up.

He rose slowly to his feet, blinking a little.

He never left the cinema very quickly. It always took him a moment or two to return to the prosaic reality of everyday life.

He glanced round. Not many people this afternoon—naturally. They were all at the races. Mr. Leadbetter did not approve of racing or of playing cards or of drinking or of smoking. This left him more energy to enjoy going to the pictures.

Every one was hurrying towards the exit. Mr. Leadbetter prepared to follow suit. The man in the seat in front of him was asleep—slumped down in his chair. Mr. Leadbetter felt indignant to think that anyone could sleep with such a drama as *Not a Sparrow* going on.

An irate gentleman was saying to the sleeping man whose legs were stretched out blocking the way:

"Excuse *me,* sir."

Mr. Leadbetter reached the exit. He looked back.

There seemed to be some sort of commotion. A commissionaire . . . a little knot of people. . . . Perhaps that man in front of him was dead drunk and not asleep. . . .

He hesitated and then passed out—and in so doing missed the sensation of the day—a greater sensation even than Not Half winning the St. Leger at 85 to 1.

The commissionaire was saying:

"Believe you're right, sir. . . . He's ill. . . . Why—what's the matter, sir?"

The other had drawn away his hand with an exclamation and was examining a red sticky smear.

"Blood. . . ."

The commissionaire gave a stifled exclamation.

He had caught sight of the corner of something yellow projecting from under the seat.

"Gor blimy!" he said. *"It's a b—A.B.C."*

CHAPTER XXV

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

Mr. Cust came out of the Regal Cinema and looked up at the sky.

A beautiful evening. . . . A really beautiful evening. . . .

A quotation from Browning came into his head.

"God's in His heaven. All's right with the world."

He had always been fond of that quotation.

Only there were times, very often, when he had felt it wasn't true. . . .

He trotted along the street smiling to himself until he came to the Black Swan where he was staying.

He climbed the stairs to his bedroom, a stuffy little room on the second floor, giving over a paved inner court and garage.

As he entered the room, his smile faded suddenly. There was a stain on his sleeve near the cuff. He touched it tentatively—wet and red—blood. . . .

His hand dipped into his pocket and brought out something—a long, slender knife. The blade of that, too, was sticky and red. . . .

Mr. Cust sat there a long time.

Once his eyes shot round the room like those of a hunted animal.

His tongue passed feverishly over his lips. . . .

"It isn't my fault," said Mr. Cust.

He sounded as though he were arguing with somebody—a schoolboy pleading to his schoolmaster.

He passed his tongue over his lips again. . . .

Again, tentatively, he felt his coat sleeve.

His eyes crossed the room to the wash-basin.

A minute later he was pouring out water from the old-fashioned jug into the basin. Removing his coat, he rinsed the sleeve, carefully squeezing it out. . . .

Ugh! The water was red now. . . .

A tap on the door.

He stood there frozen into immobility—staring.

The door opened. A plump young woman—jug in hand.

"Oh, excuse me, sir. Your hot water, sir."

He managed to speak then.

"Thank you. . . . I've washed in cold. . . ."

Why had he said that? Immediately her eyes went to the basin.

He said frenziedly: "I—I've cut my hand. . . ."

There was a pause—yes, surely a very long pause—before she said: "Yes, sir."

She went out, shutting the door.

Mr. Cust stood as though turned to stone.

It had come—at last. . . .

He listened.

Were there voices—exclamations—feet mounting the stairs?

He could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart. . . .

Then, suddenly, from frozen immobility he leaped into activity.

He slipped on his coat, tiptoed to the door and opened it. No noises as yet except the familiar murmur arising from the bar. He crept down the stairs. . . .

Still no one. That was luck. He paused at the foot of the stairs. Which way now?

He made up his mind, darted quickly along a passage and out by the door that gave into the yard. A couple of chauffeurs were there tinkering with cars and discussing winners and losers.

Mr. Cust hurried across the yard and out into the street.

Round the first corner to the right—then to the left—right again. . . .

Dare he risk the station?

Yes—there would be crowds there—special trains—if luck were on his side he would do it all right. . . .

If only luck were with him. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

INSPECTOR CROME was listening to the excited utterances of Mr. Leadbetter.

"I assure you, inspector, my heart misses a beat when I think of it. He must actually have been sitting beside me all through the programme!"

Inspector Crome, completely indifferent to the behaviour of Mr. Leadbetter's heart, said:

"Just let me have it quite clear? This man went out towards the close of the big picture—"

"*Not a Sparrow*—Katherine Royal," murmured Mr. Leadbetter automatically.

"He passed you and in doing so stumbled—"

"He *pretended* to stumble, I see it now. Then he leaned over the seat in front to pick up his hat. He must have stabbed the poor fellow then."

"You didn't hear anything? A cry? Or a groan?"

Mr. Leadbetter had heard nothing but the loud, hoarse accents of Katherine Royal, but in the vividness of his imagination he invented a groan.

Inspector Crome took the groan at its face value and bade him proceed.

"And then he went out—"

"Can you describe him?"

"He was a very big man. Six foot at least. A giant."

"Fair or dark?"

"I—well—I'm not exactly sure. I think he was bald. A sinister-looking fellow."

"He didn't limp, did he?" asked Inspector Crome.

"Yes—yes, now you come to speak of it I think he did limp. Very dark, he might have been some kind of half-caste."

"Was he in his seat the last time the lights came up?"

"No. He came in after the big picture began."

Inspector Crome nodded, handed Mr. Leadbetter a statement to sign and got rid of him.

"That's about as bad a witness as you'll find," he remarked pessimistically. "He'd say anything with a little leading. It's perfectly clear that he hasn't the faintest idea what our man looks like. Let's have the commissionaire back."

The commissionaire, very stiff and military, came in and stood to attention, his eyes fixed on Colonel Anderson.

"Now, then, Jameson, let's hear your story."

Jameson saluted.

"Yes, sir. Close of the performance, sir. I was told there was a gentleman taken ill, sir. Gentleman was in the two and fourpennies, slumped down in his seat like. Other gentlemen standing round. Gentleman looked bad to me, sir. One of the gentlemen standing by put his hand to the ill gentleman's coat and drew my attention. Blood, sir. It was clear the gentleman was dead—stabbed, sir. My attention was drawn to an A.B.C. railway guide, sir, under the seat. Wishing to act correctly, I did not touch same, but reported to the police immediate that a tragedy had occurred."

"Very good, Jameson, you acted very properly."

"Thank you, sir."

"Did you notice a man leaving the two and fourpennies about five minutes earlier?"

"There were several, sir."

"Could you describe them?"

"Afraid not, sir. One was Mr. Geoffrey Parnell. And there was a young fellow, Sam Baker, with his young lady. I didn't notice anybody else in particular."

"A pity. That'll do, Jameson."

"Yes, sir."

The commissionaire saluted and departed.

"The medical details we've got," said Colonel Anderson. "We'd better have the fellow that found him next."

A police constable came in and saluted.

"Mr. Hercule Poirot's here, sir, and another gentleman."

Inspector Crome frowned.

"Oh, well," he said. "Better have 'em in, I suppose."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DONCASTER MURDER

Coming in hard on Poirot's heels, I just caught the fag end of Inspector Crome's remark.

Both he and the Chief Constable were looking worried and depressed.

Colonel Anderson greeted us with a nod of the head.

"Glad you've come, M. Poirot," he said politely. I think he guessed that Crome's remark might have reached our ears. "We've got it in the neck again, you see."

"Another A.B.C. murder?"

"Yes. Damned audacious bit of work. Man leaned over and stabbed the fellow in the back."

"Stabbed this time?"

"Yes, varies his methods a bit, doesn't he? Biff on the head, strangling, now a knife. Versatile devil—what? Here are the medical details if you care to see 'em."

He shoved a paper towards Poirot.

"A.B.C. down on the floor between the dead man's feet," he added.

"Has the dead man been identified?" asked Poirot.

"Yes. A.B.C.'s slipped up for once—if that's any satisfaction to us. Deceased's a man called Earlsfield—George Earlsfield. Barber by profession."

"Curious," commented Poirot.

"May have skipped a letter," suggested the Colonel.

My friend shook his head doubtfully.

"Shall we have in the next witness?" asked Crome. "He's anxious to get home."

"Yes, yes—let's get on."

A middle-aged gentleman strongly resembling the frog footman in *Alice in Wonderland* was led in. He was highly excited and his voice was shrill with emotion.

"Most shocking experience I have ever known," he squeaked. "I have a weak heart, sir—a very weak heart; it might have been the death of me."

"Your name, please," said the inspector.

"Downes. Roger Emmanuel Downes."

"Profession?"

"I am a master at Highfield School for boys."

"Now, Mr. Downes, will you tell us in your own words what happened."

"I can tell you that very shortly, gentlemen. At the close of the performance I rose from my seat. The seat on my left was empty but in the one beyond a man was sitting, apparently asleep. I was unable to pass him to get out as his legs were stuck out in front of him. I asked him to allow me to pass. As he did not move I repeated my request in—a—er—slightly louder tone. He still made no response. I then took him by the shoulder to waken him. His body slumped down further and I became aware that he was either unconscious or seriously ill. I called out: 'This gentleman is taken ill. Fetch the commissionaire.' The commissionaire came. As I took my hand from the man's shoulder I found it was wet and red. . . . I realized that the man had been stabbed. At the same moment the commissionaire noticed the A.B.C. railway guide. . . . I can assure you, gentlemen, the shock was terrific! Anything might have happened! For years I have suffered from cardiac weakness—"

Colonel Anderson was looking at Mr. Downes with a very curious expression.

"You can consider that you're a lucky man, Mr. Downes."

"I do, sir. Not even a palpitation!"

"You don't quite take my meaning, Mr. Downes. You were sitting two seats away, you say?"

"Actually I was sitting at first in the next seat to the murdered man—then I moved along so as to be behind an empty seat."

"You're about the same height and build as the dead man, aren't you, and you were wearing a woollen scarf round your neck just as he was?"

"I fail to see—" began Mr. Downes stiffly.

"I'm telling you, man," said Colonel Anderson, "just where your luck came in. Somehow or other, when the murderer followed you in, he got confused. *He picked on the wrong back.* I'll eat my hat, Mr. Downes, if that knife wasn't meant for you!"

However well Mr. Downes' heart had stood former tests, it was unable to stand up to this one. Mr. Downes sank on a chair, gasped, and turned purple in the face.

"Water," he gasped. "Water. . . ."

A glass was brought him. He sipped it whilst his complexion gradually returned to the normal.

"Me?" he said. "Why me?"

"It looks like it," said Crome. "In fact, it's the only explanation."

"You mean that this man—this—this fiend incarnate—this blood-thirsty madman has been following *me* about waiting for an opportunity?"

"I should say that was the way of it."

"But in heaven's name, why *me?"* demanded the outraged schoolmaster.

Inspector Crome struggled with the temptation to reply:

"Why not?" and said instead: "I'm afraid it's no good expecting a lunatic to have reasons for what he does."

"God bless me soul," said Mr. Downes, sobered into whispering.

He got up. He looked suddenly old and shaken.

"If you don't want me any more, gentlemen, I think I'll go home. I—I don't feel very well."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Downes. I'll send a constable with you—just to see you're all right."

"Oh, no—no, thank you. That's not necessary."

"Might as well," said Colonel Anderson gruffly.

His eyes slid sideways, asking an imperceptible question of the inspector. The latter gave an equally imperceptible nod.

Mr. Downes went out shakily.

"Just as well he didn't tumble to it," said Colonel Anderson. "There'll be a couple of them—eh?"

"Yes, sir. Your Inspector Rice has made arrangements. The house will be watched."

"You think," said Poirot, "that when A.B.C. finds out his mistake he might try again?"

Anderson nodded.

"It's a possibility," he said. "Seems a methodical sort of chap, A.B.C. It will upset him if things don't go according to programme."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Wish we could get a description of the fellow," said Colonel Anderson irritably. "We're as much in the dark as ever."

"It may come," said Poirot.

"Think so? Well, it's possible. Damn it all, hasn't any one got eyes in their head?"

"Have patience," said Poirot.

"You seem very confident, M. Poirot. Got any reason for this optimism?"

"Yes, Colonel Anderson. Up to now, the murderer has not made a mistake. He is bound to make one soon."

"If that's all you've got to go on," began the Chief Constable with a snort, but he was interrupted.

"Mr. Ball of the Black Swan is here with a young woman, sir. He reckons he's got summat to say might help you."

"Bring them along. Bring them along. We can do with anything helpful."

Mr. Ball of the Black Swan was a large, slow-thinking, heavily-moving man. He exhaled a strong odour of beer. With him was a plump young woman with round eyes clearly in a state of high excitement.

"Hope I'm not intruding or wasting valuable time," said Mr. Ball in a slow, thick voice. "But this wench, Mary here, reckons she's got something to tell as you ought to know."

Mary giggled in a half-hearted way.

"Well, my girl, what is it?" said Anderson. "What's your name?"

"Mary, sir—Mary Stroud."

"Well, Mary, out with it."

Mary turned her round eyes on her master.

"It's her business to take up hot water to the gents' bedrooms," said Mr. Ball, coming to the rescue. "About half a dozen gentlemen we'd got staying. Some for the races and some just commercials."

"Yes, yes," said Anderson impatiently.

"Get on, lass," said Mr. Ball. "Tell your tale. Nowt to be afraid of."

Mary gasped, groaned and plunged in a breathless voice into her narrative.

"I knocked on door and there wasn't no answer, otherwise I wouldn't have gone in leastways not unless gentleman had said 'Come in,' and as he didn't say nothing I went in and he was there washing his hands."

She paused and breathed deeply.

"Go on, my girl," said Anderson.

Mary looked sideways at her master and as though receiving inspiration from his slow nod, plunged on again.

" 'It's your hot water, sir,' I said, 'and I did knock,' but 'Oh,' he says, 'I've washed in cold,' he said, and so, naturally, I looks in basin, and oh! God help me, sir, *it were all red!*"

"Red?" said Anderson sharply.

Ball struck in.

"The lass told me that he had his coat off and that he was holding the sleeve of it, and it was all wet—that's right, eh, lass?"

"Yes, sir, that's right, sir."

She plunged on:

"And his face, sir, it looked queer, mortal queer it looked. Gave me quite a turn."

"When was this?" asked Anderson sharply.

"About a quarter after five, so near as I can reckon."

"Over three hours ago," snapped Anderson. "Why didn't you come at once?"

"Didn't hear about it at once," said Ball. "Not till news came along as there'd been another murder done. And then the lass she screams out as it might have been blood in the basin, and I asks her what she means, and she tells me. Well, it doesn't sound right to me and I went upstairs myself. Nobody in the room. I asks a few questions and one of the lads in courtyard says he saw a fellow sneaking out that way and by his description it was the right one. So I says to the missus as Mary here had best go to police. She doesn't like the idea, Mary doesn't, and I says I'll come along with her."

Inspector Crome drew a sheet of paper towards him.

"Describe this man," he said. "As quick as you can. There's no time to be lost."

"Medium-sized, he were," said Mary. "And stooped and wore glasses."

"His clothes?"

"A dark suit and a Homburg hat. Rather shabby-looking."

She could add little to this description.

Inspector Crome did not insist unduly. The telephone wires were soon busy, but neither the inspector nor the Chief Constable were over optimistic.

Crome elicited the fact that the man, when seen sneaking across the yard, had had no bag or suitcase.

"There's a chance there," he said.

Two men were dispatched to the Black Swan.

Mr. Ball, swelling with pride and importance, and Mary, somewhat tearful, accompanied them.

The sergeant returned about ten minutes later.

"I've brought the register, sir," he said. "Here's the signature."

We crowded round. The writing was small and cramped—not easy to read.

"A. B. Case—or is it Cash?" said the Chief Constable.

"A.B.C.," said Crome significantly.

"What about luggage?" asked Anderson.

"One good-sized suitcase, sir, full of small cardboard boxes."

"Boxes? What was in 'em?"

"Stockings, sir. Silk stockings."

Crome turned to Poirot.

"Congratulations," he said. "Your hunch was right."

CHAPTER XXVIII

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

INSPECTOR CROME was in his office at Scotland Yard.

The telephone on his desk gave a discreet buzz and he picked it up.

"Jacobs speaking, sir. There's a young fellow come in with a story that I think you ought to hear."

Inspector Crome sighed. On an average twenty people a day turned up with so-called important information about the A.B.C. case. Some of them were harmless lunatics, some of them were well-meaning persons who genuinely believed that their information was of value. It was the duty of Sergeant Jacobs to act as a human sieve—retaining the grosser matter and passing on the residue to his superior.

"Very well, Jacobs," said Crome. "Send him along."

A few minutes later there was a tap on the inspector's door and Sergeant Jacobs appeared, ushering in a tall, moderately good-looking young man.

"This is Mr. Tom Hartigan, sir. He's got something to tell us which may have a possible bearing on the A.B.C. case."

The inspector rose pleasantly and shook hands.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hartigan. Sit down, won't you? Smoke? Have a cigarette?"

Tom Hartigan sat down awkwardly and looked with some awe at what he called in his own mind "one of the bigwigs." The appearance of the inspector vaguely disappointed him. He looked quite an ordinary person!

"Now then," said Crome. "You've got something to tell us that you think may have a bearing on the case. Fire ahead."

Tom began nervously.

"Of course it may be nothing at all. It's just an idea of mine. I may be wasting your time."

Again Inspector Crome sighed imperceptibly. The amount of time he had to waste in reassuring people!

"We're the best judge of that. Let's have the facts, Mr. Hartigan."

"Well, it's like this, sir. I've got a young lady, you see, and her mother lets rooms. Up Camden Town way. Their second floor back has been let for over a year to a man called Cust."

"Cust—eh?"

"That's right, sir. A sort of middle-aged bloke what's rather vague and soft—and come down in the world a bit, I should say. Sort of creature who wouldn't hurt a fly, you'd say—and I'd never of dreamed of anything being wrong if it hadn't been for something rather odd."

In a somewhat confused manner and repeating himself once or twice, Tom described his encounter with Mr. Cust at Euston Station and the incident of the dropped ticket.

"You see, sir, look at it how you will, it's funny like. Lily, that's my young lady, sir—she was quite positive that it was Cheltenham he said, and her mother says the same—says she remembers distinct talking about it the morning he went off. Of course, I didn't pay much attention to it at the time. Lily—my young lady said as how she hoped he wouldn't cop it for this A.B.C. fellow going to Doncaster—and then she says it's rather a coincidence because he was down Churston way at the time of the last crime. Laughing like, I asks her whether he was at Bexhill the time before, and she says she don't know where he was, but he was away at the seaside —that she does know. And then I said to her it would be odd if he was the A.B.C. himself and she said poor Mr. Cust wouldn't hurt a fly—and that was all at the time. We didn't think no more about it. At least, in a sort of way I did, sir, underneath like. I began wondering about this Cust fellow and thinking that, after all, harmless as he seemed, he might be a bit batty."

Tom took a breath and then went on. Inspector Crome was listening intently now.

"And then after the Doncaster murder, sir, it was in all the papers that information was wanted as to the whereabouts of a certain A. B. Case or Cash, and it gave a description that fitted well enough. First evening off I had, I went round to Lily's and asked her what her Mr. Cust's initial's were. She couldn't remember at first, but her mother did. Said they were A. B. right enough. Then we got down to it and tried to figure out if Cust had been away at the time of the first murder at Andover. Well, as you know, sir, it isn't too easy to remember things three months back. We had a job of it, but we got it fixed down in the end, because Mrs. Marbury had a brother come from Canada to see her on June 21st. He arrived unexpected like and she wanted to give him a bed, and Lily suggested that as Mr. Cust was away Bert Marbury might have his bed. But Mrs. Marbury wouldn't agree, because she said it wasn't acting right by her lodger, and she always liked to act fair and square. But we fixed the date all right because of Bert Marbury's ship docking at Southampton that day."

Inspector Crome had listened very attentively, jotting down an occasional note.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all, sir. I hope you don't think I'm making a lot of nothing."

Tom flushed slightly.

"Not at all. You were quite right to come here. Of course, it's very slight evidence—these dates may be mere coincidence and the likeness of the name, too. But it certainly warrants my having an interview with your Mr. Cust. Is he at home now?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did he return?"

"The evening of the Doncaster murder, sir."

"What's he been doing since?"

"He's stayed in mostly, sir. And he's been looking very queer, Mrs. Marbury says. He buys a lot of newspapers—goes out early and gets the morning ones, and then after dark he goes out and gets the evening ones. Mrs. Marbury says he talks a lot to himself, too. She thinks he's getting queerer."

"What is this Mrs. Marbury's address?"

Tom gave it to him.

"Thank you. I shall probably be calling round in the course of the day. I need hardly tell you to be careful of your manner if you come across this Cust."

He rose and shook hands.

"You may be quite satisfied you did the right thing in coming to us. Good-morning, Mr. Hartigan."

"Well, sir?" asked Jacobs, re-entering the room a few minutes later. "Think it's the goods?"

"It's promising," said Inspector Crome. "That is, if the facts are as the boy stated them. We've had no luck with the stocking manufacturers yet. It was time we got hold of something. By the way, give me that file of the Churston case."

He spent some minutes looking for what he wanted.

"Ah, here it is. It's amongst the statements made to the Torquay police. Young man of the name of Hill. Deposes he was leaving the Torquay Pavilion after the film *Not a Sparrow* and noticed a man behaving queerly. He was talking to himself. Hill heard him say, 'That's an idea.' *Not a Sparrow*—that's the film that was on at the Regal in Doncaster?"

"Yes, sir."

"There may be something in that. Nothing to it at the time—but it's possible that the idea of the *modus operandi* for his next crime occurred to our man then. We've got Hill's name and address, I see. His description of the man is vague but it links up well enough with the descriptions of Mary Stroud and this Tom Hartigan. . . ."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"We're getting warm," said Inspector Crome—rather inaccurately, for he himself was always slightly chilly.

"Any instructions, sir?"

"Put on a couple of men to watch this Camden Town address, but I don't want our bird frightened. I must have a word with the A.C. Then I think it would be as well if Cust was brought along here and asked if he'd like to make a statement. It sounds as though he's quite ready to get rattled."

Outside Tom Hartigan had rejoined Lily Marbury who was waiting for him on the Embankment.

"All right, Tom?"

Tom nodded.

"I saw Inspector Crome himself. The one who's in charge of the case."

"What's he like?"

"A bit quiet and la-di-da—not my idea of a detective."

"That's Lord Trenchard's new kind," said Lily with respect. "Some of them are ever so grand. Well, what did he say?"

Tom gave her a brief résumé of the interview.

"So they think as it really was him?"

"They think it might be. Anyway, they'll come along and ask him a question or two."

"Poor Mr. Cust."

"It's no good saying poor Mr. Cust, my girl. If he's A.B.C., he's committed four terrible murders."

Lily sighed and shook her head.

"It does seem awful," she observed.

"Well, now you're going to come and have a bite of lunch, my girl. Just you think that if we're right I expect my name will be in the papers!"

"Oh, Tom, will it?"

"Rather. And yours, too. *And* your mother's. And I dare say you'll have your picture in, too."

"Oh, Tom." Lily squeezed his arm in an ecstasy.

"And in the meantime, what do you say to a bite at the Corner House?"

Lily squeezed tighter.

"Come on then!"

"All right—half a minute. I must just telephone from the station."

"Who to?"

"A girl I was going to meet."

She slipped across the road, and rejoined him three minutes later, looking rather flushed.

"Now then, Tom." She slipped her arm in his.

"Tell me more about Scotland Yard. You didn't see the other one there?"

"What other one?"

"The Belgian gentleman. The one that A.B.C. writes to always."

"No. He wasn't there."

"Well, tell me all about it. What happened when you got inside? Who did you speak to and what did you say?"

Mr. Cust put the receiver back very gently on the hook.

He turned to where Mrs. Marbury was standing in the doorway of a room, clearly devoured with curiosity.

"Not often you have a telephone call, Mr. Cust?"

"No—er—no, Mrs. Marbury. It isn't."

"Not bad news, I trust?"

"No—no." How persistent the woman was. His eye caught the legend on the newspaper he was carrying.

Births—Marriages—Deaths . . .

"My sister's just had a little boy," he blurted out.

He—who had never had a sister!

"Oh, dear! Now—well, that *is* nice, I am sure. ('And never once mentioned a sister all these years,' was in her inward thought. 'If that isn't just like a man!') I was surprised, I'll tell you, when the lady asked to speak to Mr. Cust. Just at first I fancied it was my Lily's voice—something like hers, it was—but haughtier if you know what I mean—sort of high up in the air. Well, Mr. Cust, my congratulations, I'm sure. Is it the first one, or have you other little nephews and nieces?"

"It's the only one," said Mr. Cust. "The only one I've ever had or likely to have, and—er—I think I must go off at once. They—they want me to come. I—I think I can just catch a train if I hurry."

"Will you be away long, Mr. Cust?" called Mrs. Marbury as he ran up the stairs.

"Oh, no—two or three days—that's all."

He disappeared into his bedroom. Mrs. Marbury retired into the kitchen, thinking sentimentally of "the dear little mite."

Her conscience gave her a sudden twinge.

Last night Tom and Lily and all the hunting back over dates! Trying to make out that Mr. Cust was that dreadful monster, A.B.C. Just because of his initials and because of a few coincidences.

"I don't suppose they meant it seriously," she thought comfortably. "And now I hope they'll be ashamed of themselves."

In some obscure way that she could not have explained, Mr. Cust's statement that his sister had had a baby had effectually removed any doubts Mrs. Marbury might have had of her lodger's *bona fides.*

"I hope she didn't have too bad a time of it, poor dear," thought Mrs. Marbury, testing an iron against her cheek before beginning to iron out Lily's silk slip.

Her mind ran comfortably on a well-worn obstetric track.

Mr. Cust came quietly down the stairs, a bag in his hand. His eyes rested a minute on the telephone.

That brief conversation re-echoed in his brain.

"Is that you, Mr. Cust? I thought you might like to know there's an inspector from Scotland Yard may be coming to see you. . . ."

What had he said? He couldn't remember.

"Thank you—thank you, my dear . . . very kind of you. . . ."

Something like that.

Why had she telephoned to him? Could she possibly have guessed? Or did she just want to make sure he would stay in for the inspector's visit?

But how did she know the inspector was coming?

And her voice—she'd disguised her voice from her mother. . . .

It looked—it looked—as though she *knew.* . . .

But surely if she knew, she wouldn't . . .

She might, though. Women were very queer. Unexpectedly cruel and unexpectedly kind. He'd seen Lily once letting a mouse out of a mouse trap.

A kind girl. . . .

A kind, pretty girl. . . .

He paused by the hall stand with its load of umbrellas and coats.

Should he—?

A slight noise from the kitchen decided him. . . .

No, there wasn't time. . . .

Mrs. Marbury might come out. . . .

He opened the front door, passed through and closed it behind him. . . .

Where . . . ?

CHAPTER XXIX

AT SCOTLAND YARD

CONFERENCE again.

The Assistant Commissioner, Inspector Crome, Poirot and myself.

The A.C. was saying:

"A good tip that of yours, M. Poirot, about checking a large sale of stockings."

Poirot spread out his hands.

"It was indicated. This man could not be a regular agent. He sold outright instead of touting for orders."

"Got everything clear so far, inspector?"

"I think so, sir." Crome consulted a file. "Shall I run over the position to date?"

"Yes, please."

"I've checked up with Churston, Paignton and Torquay. Got a list of people where he went and offered stockings. I must say he did the thing thoroughly. Stayed at the Pitt, small hotel near Torre Station. Returned to the hotel at 10.30 on the night of the murder. Could have taken a train from Churston at 10.05, getting to Paignton at 10.15. No one answering to his description noticed on train or at stations, but that Thursday was Dartmouth Regatta and the trains back from Kingswear were pretty full.

"Bexhill much the same. Stayed at the Globe under his own name. Offered stockings to about a dozen addresses, including Mrs. Barnard and including the Ginger Cat. Left hotel early in the evening. Arrived back in London about 11.30 the following morning. As to Andover, same procedure. Stayed at the Feathers. Offered stockings to Mrs. Fowler, next door to Mrs. Ascher, and to half a dozen other people in the street. The pair Mrs. Ascher had I got from the niece (name of Drower)—they're identical with Cust's supply."

"So far, good," said the A.C.

"Acting on information received," said the inspector, "I went to the address given me by Hartigan, but found that Cust had left the house about half an hour previously. He received a telephone message, I'm told. First time such a thing had happened to him, so his landlady told me."

"An accomplice?" suggested the Assistant Commissioner.

"Hardly," said Poirot. "It is odd that—unless—"

We all looked at him inquiringly as he paused.

He shook his head, however, and the inspector proceeded.

"I made a thorough search of the room he had occupied. That search puts the matter beyond doubt. I found a block of notepaper similar to that on which the letters were written, a large quantity of hosiery and—at the back of the cupboard where the hosiery was stored—a parcel much the same shape and size but which turned out to contain—not hosiery—*but eight new A.B.C. railway guides!*"

"Proof positive," said the Assistant Commissioner.

"I've found something else, too," said the inspector—his voice becoming suddenly almost human with triumph. "Only found it this morning, sir. Not had time to report yet. There was no sign of the knife in his room—"

"It would be the act of an imbecile to bring that back with him," remarked Poirot.

"After all, he's not a reasonable human being," remarked the inspector. "Anyway, it occurred to me that he might just possibly have brought it back to the house and then realized the danger of hiding it (as M. Poirot points out) in his room, and have looked about elsewhere. What place in the house would he be likely to select? I got it straightaway. *The hall stand*—no one ever moves a hall stand. With a lot of trouble I got it moved out from the wall—and there it was!"

"The knife?"

"The knife. Not a doubt of it. The dried blood's still on it."

"Good work, Crome," said the A.C. approvingly. "We only need one thing more now.

"What's that?"

"The man himself."

"We'll get him, sir. Never fear."

The inspector's tone was confident.

"What do you say, M. Poirot?"

Poirot started out of a reverie.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We are saying that it was only a matter of time before we got our man. Do you agree?"

"Oh, that—yes. Without a doubt."

His tone was so abstracted that the others looked at him curiously.

"Is there anything worrying you, M. Poirot?"

"There is something that worries me very much. It is the *why?* The *motive.*"

"But, my dear fellow, the man's crazy," said the Assistant Commissioner impatiently.

"I understand what M. Poirot means," said Crome, coming graciously to the rescue. "He's quite right. There's got to be some definite obsession. I think we'll find the root of the matter in an intensified inferiority complex. There may be persecution mania, too, and if so he may possibly associate M. Poirot with it. He may have the delusion that M. Poirot is a detective employed on purpose to hunt him down."

"H'm," said the A.C. "That's the jargon that's talked nowadays. In my day if a man was mad he was mad and we didn't look about for scientific terms to soften it down. I suppose a thoroughly up-to-date doctor would suggest putting a man like A.B.C. in a nursing home, telling him what a fine fellow he was for forty-five days on end and then letting him out as a responsible member of society."

Poirot smiled but did not answer.

The conference broke up.

"Well," said the Assistant Commissioner. "As you say, Crome, pulling him in is only a matter of time."

"We'd have had him before now," said the inspector, "if he wasn't so ordinary-looking. We've worried enough perfectly inoffensive citizens as it is."

"I wonder where he is at this minute," said the Assistant Commissioner.

CHAPTER XXX

(NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

MR. CUST stood by a greengrocer's shop.

He stared across the road.

Yes, that was it.

Mrs. Ascher. Newsagent and Tobacconist. . . .

In the empty window was a sign.

To Let.

Empty. . . .

Lifeless. . . .

"Excuse me, sir."

The greengrocer's wife, trying to get at some lemons.

He apologized, moved to one side.

Slowly he shuffled away—back towards the main street of the town. . . .

It was difficult—very difficult—now that he hadn't any money left. . . .

Not having anything to eat all day made one feel very queer and light-headed. . . .

He looked at a poster outside a newsagent's shop.

The A.B.C. Case. Murderer Still at Large. Interview with M. Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Cust said to himself:

"Hercule Poirot. I wonder if *he* knows. . . ."

He walked on again.

It wouldn't do to stand staring at that poster. . . .

He thought:

"I can't go on much longer. . . ."

Foot in front of foot . . . what an odd thing walking was. . . .

Foot in front of foot—ridiculous.

Highly ridiculous. . . .

But man was a ridiculous animal anyway. . . .

And he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, was particularly ridiculous. . . .

He always had been. . . .

People had always laughed at him. . . .

He couldn't blame them. . . .

Where was he going? He didn't know. He'd come to the end. He no longer looked anywhere but at his feet.

Foot in front of foot. . . .

He looked up. Lights in front of him. And letters. . . .

Police Station.

"That's funny," said Mr. Cust. He gave a little giggle.

Then he stepped inside. Suddenly, as he did so, he swayed and fell forward.

CHAPTER XXXI

HERCULE POIROT ASKS QUESTIONS

IT WAS a clear November day. Dr. Thompson and Chief Inspector Japp had come round to acquaint Poirot with the result of the police court proceedings in the case of Rex *v.* Alexander Bonaparte Cust.

Poirot himself had had a slight bronchial chill which had prevented his attending. Fortunately he had not insisted on having my company.

"Committed for trial," said Japp. "So that's that."

"Isn't it unusual?" I asked, "for a defence to be offered at this stage? I thought prisoners always reserved their defence."

"It's the usual course," said Japp. "I suppose young Lucas thought he might rush it through. He's a trier, I will say. Insanity's the only defence possible."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"With insanity there can be no acquittal. Imprisonment during His Majesty's pleasure is hardly preferable to death."

"I suppose Lucas thought there was a chance," said Japp. "With a first-class *alibi* for the Bexhill murder, the whole case might be weakened. I don't think he realized how strong our case is. Anyway, Lucas goes in for originality. He's a young man, and he wants to hit the public eye."

Poirot turned to Thompson.

"What's your opinion, doctor?"

"Of Cust? Upon my soul, I don't know what to say. He's playing the sane man remarkably well. He's an epileptic, of course."

"What an amazing dénouement that was," I said.

"His falling into the Andover police station in a fit? Yes—it was a fitting dramatic curtain to the drama. A.B.C. had always timed his effects well."

"Is it possible to commit a crime and be unaware of it?" I asked. "His denials seem to have a ring of truth in them."

Dr. Thompson smiled a little.

"You mustn't be taken in by that theatrical 'I swear by God' pose. It's my opinion *that Cust knows perfectly well he committed* the murders."

"When they're as fervent as that they usually do," said Crome.

"As to your question," went on Thompson, "it's perfectly possible for an epileptic subject in a state of somnambulism to commit an action and be entirely unaware of having done so. But it is the general opinion that such an action must 'not be contrary to the will of the person in the waking state.' "

He went on discussing the matter, speaking of *grand mal* and *petit mal* and, to tell the truth, confusing me hopelessly as is often the case when a learned person holds forth on his own subject.

"However, I'm against the theory that Cust committed these crimes without knowing he'd done them. You might put that theory forward if it weren't for the letters. The letters knock the theory on the head. They show premeditation and a careful planning of the crime."

"And of the letters we have still no explanation," said Poirot.

"That interests you?"

"Naturally—since they were written to me. And on the subject of the letters Cust is persistently dumb. Until I get at the reason for those letters being written to me, I shall not feel that the case is solved."

"Yes—I can understand that from your point of view. There doesn't seem to be any reason to believe that the man ever came up against you in any way?"

"None whatever."

"I might make a suggestion. Your name!"

"My name?"

"Yes. Cust is saddled—apparently by the whim of his mother (OEdipus complex there, I shouldn't wonder!)—with two extremely bombastic Christian names: Alexander and Bonaparte. You see the implications? Alexander—the popularly supposed undefeatable who sighed for more world to conquer. Bonaparte—the great Emperor of the French. He wants an adversary—an adversary, one might say, in his class. Well—there you are—Hercules the strong."

"Your words are very suggestive, doctor. They foster ideas. . . ."

"Oh, it's only a suggestion. Well, I must be off."

Dr. Thompson went out. Japp remained.

"Does this *alibi* worry you?" Poirot asked.

"It does a little," admitted the inspector. "Mind you, I don't believe in it, because I know it isn't true. But it is going to be the deuce to break it. This man Strange is a tough character."

"Describe him to me."

"He's a man of forty. A tough, confident, self-opinionated mining engineer. It's my opinion that it was he who insisted on his evidence being taken now. He wants to get off to Chile. He hoped the thing might be settled out of hand."

"He's one of the most positive people I've ever seen," I said.

"The type of man who would not like to admit he was mistaken," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"He sticks to his story and he's not one to be heckled. He swears by all that's blue that he picked up Cust in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne on the evening of July 24th. He was lonely and wanted some one to talk to. As far as I can see, Cust made an ideal listener. He didn't interrupt! After dinner he and Cust played dominoes. It appears Strange was a whale on dominoes and to his surprise Cust was pretty hot stuff too. Queer game, dominoes. People go mad about it. They'll play for hours. That's what Strange and Cust did apparently. Cust wanted to go to bed but Strange wouldn't hear of it—swore they'd keep it up until midnight at least. And that's what they did do. They separated at ten minutes past midnight. And if Cust was in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne at ten minutes past midnight on the morning of the 25th he couldn't very well be strangling Betty Barnard on the beach at Bexhill between midnight and one o'clock."

"The problem certainly seems insuperable," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Decidedly, it gives one to think."

"It's given Crome something to think about," said Japp.

"This man Strange is very positive?"

"Yes. He's an obstinate devil. And it's difficult to see just where the flaw is. Supposing Strange is making a mistake and the man wasn't Cust—why on earth should he *say* his name is Cust? And the writing in the hotel register is his all right. You can't say he's an accomplice—homicidal lunatics don't have accomplices! Did the girl die later? The doctor was quite firm in his evidence, and anyway it would take some time for Cust to get out of the hotel at Eastbourne without being seen and get over to Bexhill—fourteen miles away—"

"It is a problem—yes," said Poirot.

"Of course, strictly speaking, it oughtn't to matter. We've got Cust on the Doncaster murder—the blood-stained coat, the knife—not a loophole there. You couldn't bounce any jury into acquitting him. But it spoils a pretty case. He did the Doncaster murder. He did the Churston murder. He did the Andover murder. Then, by hell, he *must* have done the Bexhill murder. But I don't see how!"

He shook his head and got up.

"Now's your chance, M. Poirot," he said. "Crome's in a fog. Exert those cellular arrangements of yours I used to hear so much about. Show us the way he did it."

Japp departed.

"What about it, Poirot?" I said. "Are the little grey cells equal to the task?"

Poirot answered my question by another.

"Tell me, Hastings, do you consider the case ended?"

"Well—yes, practically speaking. We've got the man. And we've got most of the evidence. It's only the trimmings that are needed."

Poirot shook his head.

"The case is ended! The case! The case is the *man,* Hastings. Until we know all about the man, the mystery is as deep as ever. It is not victory because we have put him in the dock!"

"We know a fair amount about him."

"We know nothing at all! We know where he was born. We know he fought in the war and received a slight wound in the head and that he was discharged from the Army owing to epilepsy. We know that he lodged with Mrs. Marbury for nearly two years. We know that he was quiet and retiring—the sort of man that nobody notices. We know that he invented and carried out an intensely clever scheme of systemized murder. We know that he made certain incredibly stupid blunders. We know that he killed without pity and quite ruthlessly. We know, too, that he was kindly enough not to let blame rest on any other person for the crimes he committed. If he wanted to kill unmolested—how easy to let other persons suffer for his crimes. Do you not see, Hastings, that the man is a mass of contradictions? Stupid and cunning, ruthless and magnanimous—*and that there must be some dominating factor that reconciles his two natures."*

"Of course, if you treat him like a psychological study," I began.

"What else has this case been since the beginning? All along I have been groping my way—trying *to get to know the murderer.* And now I realize, Hastings, *that I do not know him at all!* I am at sea."

"The lust for power—" I began.

"Yes—that might explain a good deal. . . . But it does not satisfy me. There are things I want to know. *Why* did he commit these murders? *Why* did he choose those particular people—?"

"Alphabetically—" I began.

"Was Betty Barnard the only person in Bexhill whose name began with a B? Betty Barnard—I had an idea there. . . . It ought to be true—it must be true. But if so—"

He was silent for some time. I did not like to interrupt him.

As a matter of fact, I believe I fell asleep.

I woke to find Poirot's hand on my shoulder.

"Mon cher Hastings," he said affectionately. "My good genius."

I was quite confused by this sudden mark of esteem.

"It is true," Poirot insisted. "Always—always—you help me—you bring me luck. You inspire me."

"How have I inspired you this time?" I asked.

"While I was asking myself certain questions I remembered a remark of yours—a remark absolutely shimmering in its clear vision. Did I not say to you once that you had a genius for stating the obvious. It is the obvious that I have neglected."

"What is this brilliant remark of mine?" I asked.

"It makes everything as clear as crystal. I see the answers to all my questions. The reason for Mrs. Ascher (that, it is true, I glimpsed long ago), the reason for Sir Carmichael Clarke, the reason for the Doncaster murder, and finally and supremely important, *the reason for Hercule Poirot.*"

"Could you kindly explain?" I asked.

"Not at the moment. I require first a little more information. That I can get from our Special Legion. And then—then, *when I have got the answer to a certain question, I will go and see A.B.C.* We will be face to face at last—A.B.C. and Hercule Poirot—the adversaries."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then," said Poirot, "we will talk! *Je vous assure, Hastings*—there is nothing so dangerous *for any one who has something to hide* as conversation! Speech, so a wise old Frenchman said to me once, is an invention of man's to prevent him from thinking. It is also an infallible means of discovering that which he wishes to hide. A human being, Hastings, cannot resist the opportunity to reveal himself and express his personality which conversation gives him. Every time he will give himself away."

"What do you expect Cust to tell you?"

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"A lie," he said. "And by it, I shall know the truth!"

CHAPTER XXXII

AND CATCH A FOX

DURING the next few days Poirot was very busy. He made mysterious absences, talked very little, frowned to himself, and consistently refused to satisfy my natural curiosity as to the brilliance I had, according to him, displayed in the past.

I was not invited to accompany him on his mysterious comings and goings—a fact which I somewhat resented.

Towards the end of the week, however, he announced his intention of paying a visit to Bexhill and neighbourhood and suggested that I should come with him. Needless to say, I accepted with alacrity.

The invitation, I discovered, was not extended to me alone. The members of our Special Legion were also invited.

They were as intrigued by Poirot as I was. Nevertheless, by the end of the day, I had at any rate an idea as to the direction in which Poirot's thoughts were tending.

He first visited Mr. and Mrs. Barnard and got an exact account from her as to the hour at which Mr. Cust had called on her and exactly what he had said. He then went to the hotel at which Cust had put up and extracted a minute description of that gentleman's departure. As far as I could judge, no new facts were elicited by his questions but he himself seemed quite satisfied.

Next he went to the beach—to the place where Betty Barnard's body had been discovered. Here he walked round in circles for some minutes studying the shingle attentively. I could see little point in this, since the tide covered the spot twice a day.

However I have learnt by this time that Poirot's actions are usually dictated by an idea—however meaningless they may seem.

He then walked from the beach to the nearest point at which a car could have been parked. From there again he went to the place where the Eastbourne buses waited before leaving Bexhill.

Finally he took us all to the Ginger Cat café, where we had a somewhat stale tea served by the plump waitress, Milly Higley.

Her he complimented in a flowing Gallic style on the shape of her ankles.

"The legs of the English—always they are too thin! But you, mademoiselle, have the perfect leg. It has shape—it has an ankle!"

Milly Higley giggled a good deal and told him not to go on so. She knew what French gentlemen were like.

Poirot did not trouble to contradict her mistake as to his nationality. He merely ogled her in such a way that I was startled and almost shocked.

"Voilà," said Poirot, "I have finished in Bexhill. Presently I go to Eastbourne. One little inquiry there—that is all. Unnecessary for you all to accompany me. In the meantime come back to the hotel and let us have a cocktail. That Carlton tea, it was abominable!"

As we were sipping our cocktails Franklin Clarke said curiously:

"I suppose we can guess what you are after? You're out to break that alibi. But I can't see what you're so pleased about. You haven't got a new fact of any kind."

"No—that is true."

"Well, then?"

"Patience. Everything arranges itself, given time."

"You seem quite pleased with yourself anyway."

"Nothing so far has contradicted my little idea—that is why."

His face grew serious.

"My friend Hastings told me once that he had, as a young man, played a game called The Truth. It was a game where every one in turn was asked three questions—two of which must be answered truthfully. The third one could be barred. The questions, naturally, were of the most indiscreet kind. But to begin with every one had to swear that they would indeed speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

He paused.

"Well?" said Megan.

"Eh bien—me, I want to play that game. Only it is not necessary to have three questions. One will be enough. One question to each of you."

"Of course," said Clarke impatiently. "We'll answer anything."

"Ah, but I want you to be more serious than that. Do you all swear to speak the truth?"

He was so solemn about it that the others, puzzled, became solemn themselves. They all swore as he demanded.

"Bon," said Poirot briskly. "Let us begin—"

"I'm ready," said Thora Grey.

"Ah, but ladies first—this time it would not be the politeness. We will start elsewhere."

He turned to Franklin Clarke.

"What, *mon cher M. Clarke,* did you think of the hats the ladies wore at Ascot this year?"

Franklin Clarke stared at him.

"Is this a joke?"

"Certainly not."

"Is that seriously your question?"

"It is."

Clarke began to grin.

"Well, M. Poirot, I didn't actually go to Ascot, but from what I could see of them driving in cars, women's hats for Ascot were an even bigger joke than the hats they wear ordinarily."

"Fantastic?"

"Quite fantastic."

Poirot smiled and turned to Donald Fraser.

"When did you take your holiday this year, Monsieur?"

It was Fraser's turn to stare.

"My holiday? The first two weeks in August."

His face quivered suddenly. I guessed that the question had brought the loss of the girl he loved back to him.

Poirot, however, did not seem to pay much attention to the reply. He turned to Thora Grey and I heard the slight difference in his voice. It had tightened up. His question came sharp and clear.

"Mademoiselle, in the event of Lady Clarke's death, would you have married Sir Carmichael if he had asked you?"

The girl sprang up.

"How dare you ask me such a question. It's—it's insulting!"

"Perhaps. But you have sworn to speak the truth. *Eh bien*— Yes or no?"

"Sir Carmichael was wonderfully kind to me. He treated me almost like a daughter. And that's how I felt to him—just affectionate and grateful."

"Pardon me, but that is not answering Yes or No, mademoiselle."

She hesitated.

"The answer, of course, is no!"

He made no comment.

"Thank you, mademoiselle."

He turned to Megan Barnard. The girl's face was very pale. She was breathing hard as though braced up for an ordeal.

Poirot's voice came out like the crack of a whip lash.

"Mademoiselle, what do you hope will be the result of my investigations? Do you want me to find out the truth—or not?"

Her head went back proudly. I was fairly sure of her answer. Megan, I knew, had a fanatical passion for truth.

Her answer came clearly—and it stupified me.

"No!"

We all jumped. Poirot leant forward, studying her face.

"Mademoiselle Megan," he said, "you may not want the truth but—*ma foi*—you can speak it!"

He turned towards the door, then, recollecting, went on to Mary Drower.

"Tell me, *mon enfant,* have you a young man?"

Mary, who had been looking apprehensive, looked startled and blushed.

"Oh, Mr. Poirot. I—I—well, I'm not sure."

He smiled.

"Alors c'est bien, mon enfant."

He looked round for me.

"Come, Hastings, we must start for Eastbourne."

The car was waiting and soon we were driving along the coast road that leads through Pevensey to Eastbourne.

"Is it any use asking you anything, Poirot?"

"Not at this moment. Draw your own conclusions as to what I am doing."

I relapsed into silence.

Poirot, who seemed pleased with himself, hummed a little tune. As we passed through Pevensey he suggested that we stop and have a look over the castle.

As we were returning towards the car, we paused a moment to watch a ring of children—Brownies, I guessed, by their get-up—who were singing a ditty in shrill, untuneful voices. . . .

"What is it that they say, Hastings? I cannot catch the words."

I listened—till I caught one refrain.

"—And catch a fox
And put him in a box
And never let him go."

"And catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go!" repeated Poirot.

His face had gone suddenly grave and stern.

"It is very terrible that, Hastings." He was silent a minute. "You hunt the fox here?"

"I don't. I've never been able to afford to hunt. And I don't think there's much hunting in this part of the world."

"I meant in England generally. A strange sport. The waiting at the covert side—then they sound the tally-ho, do they not?—and the run begins—across the country—over the hedges and ditches—and the fox he runs—and sometimes he doubles back—but the dogs—"

"Hounds!"

"—hounds are on his trail, and at last they catch him and he dies—quickly and horribly."

"I suppose it does sound cruel, but really—"

"The fox enjoys it? Do not say *les bêtises,* my friend. *Tout de même*—it is better that—the quick, cruel death—than what those children were singing. . . .

"To be shut away—in a box—for ever. . . . No, it is not good, that."

He shook his head. Then he said, with a change of tone:

"To-morrow, I am to visit the man Cust," and he added to the chauffeur:

"Back to London."

"Aren't you going to Eastbourne?" I cried.

"What need? I know—quite enough for my purpose."

CHAPTER XXXIII

ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST

I WAS not present at the interview that took place between Poirot and that strange man—Alexander Bonaparte Cust. Owing to his association with the police and the peculiar circumstances of the case, Poirot had no difficulty in obtaining a Home Office order—but that order did not extend to me, and in any case it was essential, from Poirot's point of view, that that interview should be absolutely private—the two men face to face.

He has given me, however, such a detailed account of what passed between them that I set it down with as much confidence on paper as though I had actually been present.

Mr. Cust seemed to have shrunk. His stoop was more apparent. His fingers plucked vaguely at his coat.

For some time, I gather, Poirot did not speak.

He sat and looked at the man opposite him.

The atmosphere became restful—soothing—full of infinite leisure. . . .

It must have been a dramatic moment—this meeting of the two adversaries in the long drama. In Poirot's place I should have felt the dramatic thrill.

Poirot, however, is nothing if not matter-of-fact. He was absorbed in producing a certain effect upon the man opposite him.

At last he said gently:

"Do you know who I am?"

The other shook his head.

"No—no—I can't say I do. Unless you are Mr. Lucas's—what do they call it?—junior. Or perhaps you come from Mr. Maynard?"

(Maynard & Cole were the defending solicitors.)

His tone was polite but not very interested. He seemed absorbed in some inner abstraction.

"I am Hercule Poirot. . . ."

Poirot said the words very gently . . . and watched for the effect.

Mr. Cust raised his head a little.

"Oh, yes?"

He said it as naturally as Inspector Crome might have said it—but without the superciliousness.

Then, a minute later, he repeated his remark.

"Oh, yes?" he said, and this time his tone was different—it held an awakened interest. He raised his head and looked at Poirot.

Hercule Poirot met his gaze and nodded his own head gently once or twice.

"Yes," he said. "I am the man to whom you wrote the letters."

At once the contact was broken. Mr. Cust dropped his eyes and spoke irritably and fretfully.

"I never wrote to you. Those letters weren't written by me. I've said so again and again."

"I know," said Poirot. "But if you did not write them, who did?"

"An enemy. I must have an enemy. They are all against me. The police—every one—all against me. It's a gigantic conspiracy."

Poirot did not reply.

Mr. Cust said:

"Every one's hand has been against me—always."

"Even when you were a child?"

Mr. Cust seemed to consider.

"No—no—not exactly then. My mother was very fond of me. But she was ambitious—terribly ambitious. That's why she gave me those ridiculous names. She had some absurd idea that I'd cut a figure in the world. She was always urging me to assert myself—talking about will power . . . saying any one could be master of his fate . . . she said I could do anything!"

He was silent for a minute.

"She was quite wrong, of course. I realized that myself quite soon. I wasn't the sort of person to get on in life. I was always doing foolish things—making myself look ridiculous. And I was timid—afraid of people. I had a bad time at school—the boys found out my Christian names—they used to tease me about them. . . . I did very badly at school—in games and work and everything."

He shook his head.

"Just as well poor mother died. She'd have been disappointed. . . . Even when I was at the Commercial College I was stupid—it took me longer to learn typing and shorthand than any one else. And yet I didn't *feel* stupid—if you know what I mean."

He cast a sudden appealing look at the other man.

"I know what you mean," said Poirot. "Go on."

"It was just the feeling that everybody else *thought* me stupid. Very paralyzing. It was the same thing later in the office."

"And later still—in the war?" prompted Poirot.

Mr. Cust's face lightened up suddenly.

"You know," he said, "I enjoyed the war. What I had of it, that was. I felt, for the first time, a man like anybody else. We were all in the same box. I was as good as any one else."

His smile faded.

"And then I got that wound on the head. Very slight. But they found out I had fits. . . . I'd always known, of course, that there were times when I hadn't been quite sure what I was doing. Lapses, you know. And of course, once or twice I'd fallen down. But I don't really think they ought to have discharged me for that. No, I don't think it was right."

"And afterwards?" asked Poirot.

"I got a place as a clerk. Of course there was good money to be got just then. And I didn't do so badly after the war. Of course, a smaller salary. . . . And—I didn't seem to get on. I was always being passed over for promotion. I wasn't go-ahead enough. It grew very difficult—really very difficult. . . . Especially when the slump came. To tell you the truth, I'd got hardly enough to keep body and soul together (and you've got to look presentable as a clerk) when I got the offer of this stocking job. A salary and commission!"

Poirot said gently:

"But you are aware, are you not, that the firm whom you say employed you deny the fact?"

Mr. Cust got excited again.

"That's because they're in the conspiracy—they must be in the conspiracy."

He went on:

"I've got written evidence—written evidence. I've got their letters to me, giving me instructions as to what places to go to and a list of people to call on."

"Not *written* evidence exactly—*typewritten* evidence."

"It's the same thing. Naturally a big firm of wholesale manufacturers typewrite their letters."

"Don't you know, Mr. Cust, that a typewriter can be identified? All those letters were typed by one particular machine."

"What of it?"

"And that machine was your own—the one found in your room."

"It was sent me by the firm at the beginning of my job."

"Yes, but these letters were received *afterwards.* So it looks, does it not, as though *you typed them yourself and posted them to yourself?"*

"No, no! It's all part of the plot against me!"

He added suddenly:

"Besides, their letters *would* be written on the same kind of machine."

"The same *kind,* but not the same *actual* machine."

Mr. Cust repeated obstinately:

"It's a plot!"

"And the A.B.C.'s that were found in the cupboard?"

"I know nothing about them. I thought they were all stockings."

"Why did you tick off the name of Mrs. Ascher in that first list of people in Andover?"

"Because I decided to start with her. One must begin somewhere."

"Yes, that is true. *One must begin somewhere."*

"I don't mean that!" said Mr. Cust. "I don't mean what you mean!"

"But you know what I meant?"

Mr. Cust said nothing. He was trembling.

"I didn't do it!" he said. "I'm perfectly innocent! It's all a mistake. Why, look at that second crime—that Bexhill one. I was playing dominoes at Eastbourne. You've got to admit that!"

His voice was triumphant.

"Yes," said Poirot. His voice was meditative—silky. "But it's so easy, isn't it, to make a mistake of one day? And if you're an obstinate, positive man, like Mr. Strange, you'll never consider the possibility of having been mistaken. What you've said you'll stick to. . . . He's that kind of man. And the hotel register—it's very easy to put down the wrong date when you're signing it—probably no one will notice it at the time."

"I was playing dominoes that evening!"

"You play dominoes very well, I believe."

Mr. Cust was a little flurried by this.

"I—I—well, I believe I do."

"It is a very absorbing game, is it not, with a lot of skill in it?"

"Oh, there's a lot of play in it—a lot of play! We used to play a lot in the city, in the lunch hour. You'd be surprised the way total strangers come together over a game of dominoes."

He chuckled.

"I remember one man—I've never forgotten him because of something he told me—we just got talking over a cup of coffee, and we started dominoes. Well, I felt after twenty minutes that I'd known that man all his life."

"What was it that he told you?" asked Poirot.

Mr. Cust's face clouded over.

"It gave me a turn—a nasty turn. Talking of your fate being written in your hand, he was. And he showed me his hand and the lines that showed he'd have two near escapes of being drowned—and he had had two near escapes. And then he looked at mine and he told me some amazing things. Said I was going to be one of the most celebrated men in England before I died. Said the whole country would be talking about me. But he said—he said. . . ."

Mr. Cust broke down—faltered. . . .

"Yes?"

Poirot's gaze held a quiet magnetism. Mr. Cust looked at him, looked away, then back again like a fascinated rabbit.

"He said—he said—that it looked as though I might die a violent death—and he laughed and said: 'Almost looks as though you might die on the scaffold,' and then he laughed and said that was only his joke. . . ."

He was silent suddenly. His eyes left Poirot's face—they ran from side to side. . . .

"My head—I suffer very badly with my head . . . the headaches are something cruel sometimes. And then there are times when I don't know—when I don't know. . . ."

He broke down.

Poirot leant forward. He spoke very quietly but with great assurance.

"But you do know, don't you," he said, *"that you committed the murders?"*

Mr. Cust looked up. His glance was quite simple and direct. All resistance had left him. He looked strangely at peace.

"Yes," he said. "I know."

"But—I'm right, am I not?—*you don't know* why *you did them?"*

Mr. Cust shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't."

CHAPTER XXXIV

POIROT EXPLAINS

WE WERE sitting in a state of tense attention to listen to Poirot's final explanation of the case.

"All along," he said, "I have been worried over the *why* of this case. Hastings said to me the other day that the case was ended. I replied to him that the case was the *man!* The mystery was *not the mystery of the murders,* but the *mystery of A.B.C.* Why did he find it necessary to commit these murders? Why did he select *me* as his adversary?

"It is no answer to say that the man was mentally unhinged. To say a man does mad things because he is mad is merely unintelligent and stupid. A madman is as logical and reasoned in his actions as a sane man—*given his peculiar biased point of view.* For example, if a man insists on going out and squatting about in nothing but a loin cloth his conduct seems eccentric in the extreme. But once you know *that the man himself is firmly convinced that he is Mahatma Gandhi,* then his conduct becomes perfectly reasonable and logical.

"What was necessary in this case was to imagine a mind so constituted *that it was logical and reasonable to commit four or more murders* and to announce them beforehand by letters written to Hercule Poirot.

"My friend, Hastings, will tell you that from the moment I received the first letter I was upset and disturbed. It seemed to me at once that there was something very wrong about the letter."

"You were quite right," said Franklin Clarke dryly.

"Yes. But there, at the very start, I made a grave error. I permitted my feeling—my very strong feeling about the letter to remain a mere impression. I treated it as though it had been an intuition. In a well-balanced, reasoning mind there is no such thing as an intuition—an inspired guess! You *can* guess, of course—and a guess is either right or wrong. If it is right you call it an intuition. If it is wrong you usually do not speak of it again. But what is often called an intuition is really *an impression based on logical deduction or experience.* When an expert feels that there is something wrong about a picture or a piece of furniture or the signature on a cheque he is really basing that feeling on a host of small signs and details. He has no need to go into them minutely—his experience obviates that—the net result is *the definite impression that something is wrong.* But it is not a *guess,* it is an impression based on *experience.*

"Eh bien, I admit that I did not regard that first letter in the way I should. It just made me extremely uneasy. The police regarded it as a hoax. I myself took it seriously. I was convinced that a murder would take place in Andover as stated. As you know, a murder *did* take place.

"There was no means at that point, as I well realized, of knowing who the *person* was who had done the deed. The only course open to me was to try and understand just what *kind* of a person had done it.

"I had certain indications. The letter—the manner of the crime—the person murdered. What I had to discover was: the motive of the crime, the motive of the letter."

"Publicity," suggested Clarke.

"Surely an inferiority complex covers that," added Thora Grey.

"That was, of course, the obvious line to take. But why *me? Why Hercule Poirot?* Greater publicity could be ensured by sending the letters to Scotland Yard. More again by sending them to a newspaper. A newspaper might not print the first letter, but by the time the second crime took place, A.B.C. could have been assured of all the publicity the press could give. Why, then, Hercule Poirot? Was it for some *personal* reason? There was, discernible in the letter, a slight anti-foreign bias—but not enough to explain the matter to my satisfaction.

"Then the second letter arrived—and was followed by the murder of Betty Barnard at Bexhill. It became clear now (what I had already suspected) that the murders were to proceed on an alphabetical plan, but that fact, which seemed final to most people, left the main question unaltered to my mind. Why did A.B.C. *need* to commit these murders?"

Megan Bernard stirred in her chair.

"Isn't there such a thing as—as a blood lust?" she said.

Poirot turned to her.

"You are quite right, mademoiselle. There *is* such a thing. The lust to kill. But that did not quite fit the facts of the case. A homicidal maniac who desires to kill usually desires to kill *as many victims as possible.* It is a recurring *craving.* The great idea of such a killer is to *hide his tracks*—not to *advertise* them. When we consider the four victims selected—or at any rate three of them (for I know very little of Mr. Downes or Mr. Earlsfield), we realize that *if he had chosen,* the murderer could have done away with them without incurring any suspicion. Franz Ascher, Donald Fraser or Megan Barnard, possibly Mr. Clarke—those are the people the police would have suspected even if they had been unable to get direct proof. An unknown homicidal murderer would not have been thought of! Why, then, did the murderer feel it necessary to call attention to himself? Was it the necessity of leaving on each body a copy of an A.B.C. railway guide? Was *that* the compulsion? Was there some complex connected *with the railway guide?*

"I found it quite inconceivable at this point *to enter into the mind of the murderer.* Surely it could not be magnanimity? A horror of responsibility for the crime being fastened on an innocent person?

"Although I could not answer the main question, certain things I did feel I was learning about the murderer."

"Such as?" asked Fraser.

"To begin with—that he had a tabular mind. His crimes were listed by alphabetical progression—that was obviously important to him. On the other hand, he had no particular taste in victims—Mrs. Ascher, Betty Barnard, Sir Carmichael Clarke, they all differed widely from each other. There was no sex complex—no particular age complex, and that seemed to me to be a very curious fact. If a man kills indiscriminately it is usually because he removes any one who stands in his way or annoys him. *But the alphabetical progression showed that such was not the case here.* The other type of killer usually selects *a particular type of victim*—nearly always of the opposite sex. There was something haphazard about the procedure of A.B.C. that seemed to me to be at war with the alphabetical selection.

"The slight inferences I permitted myself to make. The choice of the A.B.C. suggested to me what I may call a *railway-minded man.* This is more common in men than women. Small boys love trains better than small girls do. It might be the sign, too, of an in some ways undeveloped mind. The 'boy' motif still predominated.

"The death of Betty Barnard and the manner of it gave me certain other indications. The manner of her death was particularly suggestive. (Forgive me, Mr. Fraser.) To begin with, she was strangled with her own belt—therefore she must almost certainly have been killed by some one with whom she was on friendly or affectionate terms. When I learnt something of her character a picture grew up in my mind.

"Betty Barnard was a flirt. She liked attention from a personable male. Therefore A.B.C., to persuade her to come out with him, must have had a certain amount of attraction—*of le sex appeal!* He must be able, as you English say, to 'get off.' He must be capable of the click! I visualize the scene on the beach thus: the man admires her belt. She takes it off, he passes it playfully round her neck—says, perhaps, 'I shall strangle you.' It is all very playful. She giggled—and he pulls—"

Donald Fraser sprang up. He was livid.

"M. Poirot—for God's sake."

Poirot made a gesture.

"It is finished. I say no more. It is over. We pass to the next murder, that of Sir Carmichael Clarke. Here the murderer goes back to his first method—the blow on the head. The same alphabetical complex—but one fact worries me a little. To be consistent the murderer should have chosen his towns in some definite sequence.

"If Andover is the 155th name under A, then the B crime should be the 155th also—or it should be the 156th and the C the 157th. Here again the towns seemed to be chosen in rather too *haphazard* a fashion."

"Isn't that because you're rather biased on that subject, Poirot?" I suggested. "You yourself are normally methodical and orderly. It's almost a disease with you."

"No, it is *not* a disease! *Quelle idée!* But I admit that I may be overstressing that point. *Passons!*

"The Churston crime gave me very little extra help. We were unlucky over it, since the letter announcing it went astray, hence no preparations could be made.

"But by the time the D crime was announced, a very formidable system of defence had been evolved. It must have been obvious that A.B.C. could not much longer hope to get away with his crimes.

"Moreover, it was at this point that the clue of the stockings came into my hands. It was perfectly clear that the presence of an individual selling stockings on and near the scene of each crime could not be a coincidence. Hence the stocking-seller must be the murderer. I may say that his description, as given me by Miss Grey, did not quite correspond with my own picture of the man who strangled Betty Barnard.

"I will pass over the next stages quickly. A fourth murder was committed—the murder of a man named George Earlsfield—it was supposed in mistake for a man named Downes, who was something of the same build and who was sitting near him in the cinema.

"And now at last comes the turn of the tide. Events play against A.B.C. instead of into his hands. He is marked down—hunted—and at last arrested.

"The case, as Hastings says, is ended!

"True enough as far as the public is concerned. The man is in prison and will eventually, no doubt, go to Broadmoor. There will be no more murders. Exit! Finis! R.I.P.

"But not for me! I know nothing—nothing at all! Neither the *why* nor the *wherefore.*

"And there is one small vexing fact. The man Cust has an *alibi* for the night of the Bexhill crime."

"That's been worrying me all along," said Franklin Clarke.

"Yes. It worried me. For the *alibi,* it has the air of being *genuine.* But it cannot be genuine unless—and now we come to two very interesting speculations.

"Supposing, my friends, that while Cust committed *three* of the crimes—the A, C and D crimes—*he did not commit the B crime."*

"M. Poirot. It isn't—"

Poirot silenced Megan Barnard with a look.

"Be quiet, mademoiselle. I am for the truth, I am! I have done with lies. Supposing, I say, *that A.B.C. did not commit the second crime.* It took place, remember, in the early hours of the 25th—the day he had arrived for the crime. Supposing some one had forestalled him? What in those circumstances would he do? Commit a *second* murder, or lie low and *accept the first as a kind of macabre present?"*

"M. Poirot!" said Megan. "That's a fantastic thought! All the crimes *must* have been committed by the same person!"

He took no notice of her and went steadily on:

"Such a hypothesis had the merit of explaining one fact—*the discrepancy between the personality of Alexander Bonaparte Cust* (who could never have made the click with any girl) *and the personality of Betty Barnard's murderer.* And it has been known, before now, that would-be murderers *have* taken advantage of the crimes committed by other people. Not all the crimes of Jack the Ripper were committed by Jack the Ripper, for instance. So far, so good.

"But then I came up against a definite difficulty.

"Up to the time of the Barnard murder, *no facts about the A.B.C. murders had been made public.* The Andover murder had created little interest. The incident of the open railway guide had not even been mentioned in the press. It therefore followed that whoever killed Betty Barnard *must have had access to facts known only to certain persons*—myself, the police, and certain relations and neighbours of Mrs. Ascher.

"That line of research seemed to lead me up against a blank wall."

The faces that looked at him were blank too. Blank and puzzled.

Donald Fraser said thoughtfully:

"The police, after all, are human beings. And they're good-looking men—"

He stopped, looking at Poirot inquiringly.

Poirot shook his head gently.

"No—it is simpler than that. I told you that there was a second speculation.

"Supposing that Cust was *not* responsible for the killing of Betty Barnard? Supposing that *some one else* killed her. Could that some one else have been responsible *for the other murders too?"*

"But that doesn't make sense?" cried Clarke.

"Doesn't it? I did then *what I ought to have done at first.* I examined the letters I had received from a totally different point of view. I had felt from the beginning that there was something wrong with them—just as a picture expert knows a picture is wrong. . . .

"I had assumed, without pausing to consider, that what was wrong with them was the fact that they were written by a madman.

"Now I examined them again—and this time I came to a totally different conclusion. What was wrong with them was *the fact that they were written by a sane man!"*

"What?" I cried.

"But yes—just that precisely! They were wrong as a picture is wrong—*because they were a fake!* They pretended to be the letters of a madman—of a homicidal lunatic, but in reality they were nothing of the kind."

"It doesn't make sense," Franklin Clarke repeated.

"Mais si! One must reason—reflect. What would be the object of writing such letters? To focus attention on the writer, to call attention to the murders! *En vérité,* it did not seem to make sense at first sight. And then I saw light. It was to focus attention on several murders—on a *group* of murders. . . . Is it not your great Shakespeare who has said, 'You cannot see the trees for the wood'?"

I did not correct Poirot's literary reminiscences. I was trying to see his point. A glimmer came to me. He went on:

"When do you notice a pin least? When it is in a pin-cushion! When do you notice an individual murder least? When it is one of *a series of related murders.*

"I had to deal with an intensely clever, resourceful murderer—reckless, daring, and a thorough gambler. *Not* Mr. Cust! He could never have committed these murders! No, I had to deal with a very different stamp of man—a man with a boyish temperament (witness the schoolboy-like letters and the railway guide), an attractive man to women, and a man with a ruthless disregard for human life, a man who was necessarily a prominent person in *one* of the crimes!

"Consider when a man or woman is killed, what are the questions that the police ask? Opportunity. Where everybody was at the time of the crime? Motive. Who benefited by the deceased's death? If the motive and the opportunity are fairly obvious, what is a would-be murderer to do? Fake an alibi—that is, manipulate *time* in some way? But this is always a hazardous proceeding. Our murderer thought of a more fantastic defence. Create a *homicidal* murderer!

"I had now only to review the various crimes and find the possible guilty person. The Andover crime? The most likely suspect for that was Franz Ascher, but I could not imagine Ascher inventing and carrying out such an elaborate scheme, nor could I see him planning a premeditated murder. The Bexhill crime? Donald Fraser was a possibility. He had brains and ability, and a methodical turn of mind. But his motive for killing his sweetheart could only be jealousy—and jealousy does not tend to premeditation. Also I learned that he had his holiday *early* in August, which rendered it unlikely that he had anything to do with the Churston crime. We come to the Churston crime next—and at once we are on infinitely more promising ground.

"Sir Carmichael Clarke was an immensely wealthy man. Who inherits his money? His wife, who is dying, has a life interest in it, and it then goes to *his brother Franklin.*"

Poirot turned slowly round till his eyes met those of Franklin Clarke.

"I was quite sure then. The man I had known a long time in my secret mind *was the same as the man whom I had known as a person. A.B.C. and Franklin Clarke were one and the same!* The daring adventurous character, the roving life, the partiality for England that had showed itself, very faintly, in the jeer at foreigners. The attractive free and easy manner—nothing easier for him than to pick up a girl in a café. The methodical tabular mind—he made a list here one day, ticked off over the headings A.B.C.—and finally, the boyish mind—mentioned by Lady Clarke and even shown by his taste in fiction—I have ascertained that there is a book in the library called *The Railway Children* by E. Nesbit. I had no further doubt in my own mind—A.B.C., the man who wrote the letters and committed the crimes, was *Franklin Clarke.*"

Clarke suddenly burst out laughing.

"Very ingenious! And what about our friend Cust, caught red-handed? What about the blood on his coat? And the knife he hid in his lodgings? He may deny he committed the crimes—"

Poirot interrupted.

"You are quite wrong. He admits the fact."

"What?" Clarke looked really startled.

"Oh, yes," said Poirot gently. "I had no sooner spoken to him than I was aware that Cust *believed himself to be guilty.*"

"And even that didn't satisfy M. Poirot?" said Clarke.

"No. Because as soon as I saw him *I also knew that he could not be guilty!* He has neither the nerve nor the daring—nor, I may add, the *brains* to plan! All along I have been aware of the dual personality of the murderer. Now I see wherein it consisted. Two people were involved—the real murderer, cunning, resourceful and daring—and the *pseudo* murderer, stupid, vacillating and suggestible.

"Suggestible—it is in that word that the mystery of Mr. Cust consists! It was not enough for you, Mr. Clarke, to devise this plan of a *series* to distract attention from a *single* crime. You had also to have a stalking horse.

"I think the idea first originated in your mind as the result of a chance encounter in a city coffee den with this odd personality with his bombastic Christian names. You were at that time turning over in your mind various plans for the murder of your brother."

"Really? And why?"

"Because you were seriously alarmed for the future. I do not know whether you realize it, Mr. Clarke, but you played into my hands when you showed me a certain letter written to you by your brother. In it he displayed very clearly his affection and absorption in Miss Thora Grey. His regard may have been a paternal one—or he may have preferred to think it so. Nevertheless, there was a very real danger that on the death of your sister-in-law he might, in his loneliness, turn to this beautiful girl for sympathy and comfort and it might end—as so often happens with elderly men—in his marrying her. Your fear was increased by your knowledge of Miss Grey. You are, I fancy, an excellent, if somewhat cynical judge of character. You judged, whether correctly or not, that Miss Grey was a type of young woman 'on the make.' You had no doubt that she would jump at the chance of becoming Lady Clarke. Your brother was an extremely healthy and vigorous man. There might be children and your chance of inheriting your brother's wealth would vanish.

"You have been, I fancy, in essence a disappointed man all your life. You have been the rolling stone—and you have gathered very little moss. You were bitterly jealous of your brother's wealth.

"I repeat then that, turning over various schemes in your mind, your meeting with Mr. Cust gave you an idea. His bombastic Christian names, his account of his epileptic seizures and of his headaches, his whole shrinking and insignificant personality, struck you as fitting him for the tool you wanted. The whole alphabetical plan sprang into your mind—Cust's initials—the fact that your brother's name began with a C and that he lived at Churston were the nucleus of the scheme. You even went so far as to hint to Cust at his possible end—though you could hardly hope that that suggestion would bear the rich fruit that it did!

"Your arrangements were excellent. In Cust's name you wrote for a large consignment of hosiery to be sent to him. You yourself sent a number of A.B.C.'s looking like a similar parcel. You wrote to him—a typed letter purporting to be from the same firm offering him a good salary and commission. Your plans were so well laid beforehand that you typed all the letters that were sent subsequently, *and then presented him with the machine on which they had been typed.*

"You had now to look about for two victims whose names began with A and B respectively and who lived at places also beginning with those same letters.

"You hit on Andover as quite a likely spot and your preliminary reconnaissance there led you to select Mrs. Ascher's shop as the scene of the first crime. Her name was written clearly over the door, and you found by experiment that she was usually alone in the shop. Her murder needed nerve, daring and reasonable luck.

"For the letter B you had to vary your tactics. Lonely women in shops might conceivably have been warned. I should imagine that you frequented a few cafés and tea-shops, laughing and joking with the girls there and finding out whose name began with the right letter and who would be suitable for your purpose.

"In Betty Barnard you found just the type of girl you were looking for. You took her out once or twice, explaining to her that you were a married man, and that outings must therefore take place in a somewhat hole and corner manner.

"Then, your preliminary plans completed, you set to work! You sent the Andover list to Cust, directing him to go there on a certain date, and you sent off the first A.B.C. letter to me.

"On the appointed day, you went to Andover—and killed Mrs. Ascher—without anything occurring to damage your plans.

"Murder No. 1 was successfully accomplished.

"For the second murder, you took the precaution of committing it, in reality, *the day before.* I am fairly certain that Betty Barnard was killed well before midnight on the 24th July.

"We now come to murder No. 3—the important—in fact, the *real* murder from your point of view.

"And here a full meed of praise is due to Hastings, who made a simple and obvious remark to which no attention was paid.

"He suggested that the third letter went astray intentionally!

"And he was right! . . .

"In that one simple fact lies the answer to the question that has puzzled me so all along. Why were the letters addressed in the first place to Hercule Poirot, a private detective, and not to the police?

"Erroneously I imagined some personal reason.

"Not at all! The letters were sent to me because the essence of your plan was that one of them *should be wrongly addressed and go astray*—but you cannot arrange for a letter addressed to the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard to go astray! It is necessary to have a *private* address. You chose me as a fairly well-known person, and a person who was sure to take the letters to the police—and also, in your rather insular mind, you enjoyed scoring off a foreigner.

"You addressed your envelope very cleverly—Whitehaven—Whitehorse—quite a natural slip. Only Hastings was sufficiently perspicacious to disregard subtleties and go straight for the obvious!

"Of course the letter was *meant* to go astray! The police were to be set on the trail *only when the murder was safely over.* Your brother's nightly walk provided you with the opportunity. And so successfully had the A.B.C. terror taken hold on the public mind that the possibility of your guilt never occurred to any one.

"After the death of your brother, of course, your object was accomplished. You had no wish to commit any more murders. On the other hand, if the murders stopped without reason, a suspicion of truth might come to some one.

"Your stalking horse, Mr. Cust, had so successfully lived up to his rôle of the invisible—because insignificant—man, that so far no one had noticed that the same person had been seen in the vicinity of the three murders! To your annoyance, even his visit to Combeside had not been mentioned. The matter had passed completely out of Miss Grey's head.

"Always daring, you decided that one more murder must take place but that this time the trail must be well blazed.

"You selected Doncaster for the scene of operations.

"Your plan was very simple. You yourself would be on the scene in the nature of things. Mr. Cust would be ordered to Doncaster by his firm. Your plan was to follow him round and trust to opportunity. Everything fell out well. Mr. Cust went to a cinema. That was simplicity itself. You sat a few seats away from him. When he got up to go, you did the same. You pretended to stumble, leaned over and stabbed a dozing man in the row in front, slid the A.B.C. on to his knees and managed to collide heavily with Mr. Cust in the darkened doorway, wiping the knife on his sleeve and slipping it into his pocket.

"You were not in the least at pains to choose a victim whose name began with D. Any one would do! You assumed—and quite rightly—that it would be considered to be a *mistake.* There was sure to be some one whose name began with D not far off in the audience. It would be assumed that he had been intended to be the victim.

"And now, my friends, let us consider the matter from the point of view of the false A.B.C.—from the point of view of Mr. Cust.

"The Andover crime means nothing to him. He is shocked and surprised by the Bexhill crime—why, he himself was there about the time! Then comes the Churston crime and the headlines in the newspapers. An A.B.C. crime at Andover when he was there, an A.B.C. crime at Bexhill, and now another close by. . . . Three crimes *and he has been at the scene of each of them.* Persons suffering from epilepsy often have blanks when they cannot remember what they have done. . . . Remember that Cust was a nervous, highly neurotic subject and extremely suggestible.

"Then he receives the order to go to Doncaster.

"Doncaster! And the next A.B.C. crime is to be in Doncaster. He must have felt as though it was fate. He loses his nerve, fancies his landlady is looking at him suspiciously, and tells her he is going to Cheltenham.

"He goes to Doncaster because it is his duty. In the afternoon he goes to a cinema. Possibly he dozes off for a minute or two.

"Imagine his feelings when on his return to his inn he discovers *that there is blood on his coat sleeve and a blood-stained knife in his pocket.* All his vague forebodings leap into certainty.

"He—he himself—is the killer! He remembers his headaches—his lapses of memory. He is quite sure of the truth—*he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, is a homicidal lunatic.*

"His conduct after that is the conduct of a hunted animal. He gets back to his lodgings in London. He is safe there—known. They think he has been in Cheltenham. He has the knife with him still—a thoroughly stupid thing to do, of course. He hides it behind the hall stand.

"Then, one day, he is warned that the police are coming. It is the end! They *know!*

"The hunted animal does his last run. . . .

"I do not know why he went to Andover—a morbid desire, I think, to go and look at the place where the crime was committed—the crime *he* committed though he can remember nothing about it. . . .

"He has no money left—he is worn out . . . his feet lead him of his own accord to the police station.

"But even a cornered beast will fight. Mr. Cust fully believes that he did the murders but he sticks strongly to his plea of innocence. And he holds with desperation to that *alibi* for the second murder. At least that cannot be laid to his door.

"As I say, when I saw him, I knew at once that he was *not* the murderer and that my name *meant nothing to him.* I knew, too, that he *thought* himself the murderer!

"After he had confessed his guilt to me, I knew more strongly than ever that my own theory was right."

"Your theory," said Franklin Clarke, "is absurd!"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, Mr. Clarke. You were safe enough *so long as no one suspected you.* Once you *were* suspected proofs were easy to obtain."

"Proofs?"

"Yes. I found the stick that you used in the Andover and Churston murders in a cupboard at Combeside. An ordinary stick with a thick knob handle. A section of wood had been removed and melted lead poured in. Your photograph was picked out from half a dozen others by two people who saw you leaving the cinema when you were supposed to be on the race-course at Doncaster. You were identified at Bexhill the other day by Milly Higley and a girl from the Scarlet Runner Roadhouse, where you took Betty Barnard to dine on the fatal evening. And finally—most damning of all—you *overlooked a most elementary precaution.* You left a fingerprint on Cust's typewriter—the typewriter that, if you are innocent, you *could never have handled."*

Clarke sat quite still for a minute, then he said:

"Rouge, impair, manque!—you win, M. Poirot! But it was worth trying!"

With an incredibly rapid motion, he whipped out a small automatic from his pocket and held it to his head.

I gave a cry and involuntarily flinched as I waited for the report.

But no report came—the hammer clicked harmlessly.

Clarke stared at it in astonishment and uttered an oath.

"No, Mr. Clarke," said Poirot. "You may have noticed I had a new manservant to-day—a friend of mine—an expert sneak thief. He removed your pistol from your pocket, unloaded it, and returned it all without your being aware of the fact."

"You unutterable little jackanapes of a foreigner!" cried Clarke, purple with rage.

"Yes, yes, that is how you feel. No, Mr. Clarke, no easy death for you. You told Mr. Cust that you had had near escapes from drowning. You know what that means—that you were born for another fate."

"You—"

Words failed him. His face was livid. His fists clenched menacingly.

Two detectives from Scotland Yard emerged from the next room. One of them was Crome. He advanced and uttered his time-honoured formula: "I warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence."

"He has said quite enough," said Poirot, and he added to Clarke: "You are very full of an insular superiority, but for myself I consider your crime not an English crime at all—not above-board—not *sporting*—"

CHAPTER XXXV

I AM sorry to relate that as the door closed behind Franklin Clarke I laughed hysterically.

Poirot looked at me in mild surprise.

"It's because you told him his crime was not sporting," I gasped.

"It was quite true. It was abominable—not so much the murder of his brother—but the cruelty that condemned an unfortunate man to a living death. *To catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go!* That is not *le sport!*"

Megan Barnard gave a deep sigh.

"I can't believe it—I can't. Is it true?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. The nightmare is over."

She looked at him and her colour deepened.

Poirot turned to Fraser.

"Mademoiselle Megan, all along, was haunted by a fear that it was you who had committed the second crime."

Donald Fraser said quietly:

"I fancied so myself at one time."

"Because of your dream?" He drew a little nearer to the young man and dropped his voice confidentially. "Your dream has a very natural explanation. It is that you find that already the image of one sister fades in your memory and that its place is taken by the other sister. Mademoiselle Megan replaces her sister in your heart, but since you cannot bear to think of yourself being unfaithful so soon to the dead, you strive to stifle the thought to kill it! That is the explanation of the dream."

Fraser's eyes went toward Megan.

"Do not be afraid to forget," said Poirot gently. "She was not so well worth remembering. In Mademoiselle Megan you have one in a hundred—*un coeur magnifique!*"

Donald Fraser's eyes lit up.

"I believe you are right."

We all crowded round Poirot asking questions, elucidating this point and that.

"Those questions, Poirot? That you asked of everybody. Was there any point in them?"

"Some of them were *simplement une blague.* But I learnt one thing that I wanted to know—*that Franklin Clarke was in London when the first letter was posted*—and also I wanted to see his face when I asked my question of Mademoiselle Thora. He was off his guard. I saw all the malice and anger in his eyes."

"You hardly spared my feelings," said Thora Grey.

"I do not fancy you returned me a truthful answer, mademoiselle," said Poirot dryly. "And now your second expectation is disappointed. Franklin Clarke will not inherit his brother's money."

She flung up her head.

"Is there any need for me to stay here and be insulted?"

"None whatever," said Poirot and held the door open politely for her.

"That fingerprint clinched things, Poirot," I said thoughtfully. "He went all to pieces when you mentioned that."

"Yes, they are useful—fingerprints."

He added thoughtfully:

"I put that in to please you, *mon ami.*"

"But, Poirot," I cried, "wasn't it *true?*"

"Not in the least, *mon ami,*" said Hercule Poirot.

I must mention a visit we had from Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust a few days later. After wringing Poirot's hand and endeavouring very incoherently and unsuccessfully to thank him, Mr. Cust drew himself up and said:

"Do you know, a newspaper has actually offered me a hundred pounds —*a hundred pounds*—for a brief account of my life and history. I—I really don't know what to do about it."

"I should not accept a hundred," said Poirot. "Be firm. Say five hundred is your price. And do not confine yourself to one newspaper."

"Do you really think—that I might—"

"You must realize," said Poirot, smiling, "that you are a very famous man. Practically the most famous man in England to-day."

Mr. Cust drew himself up still further. A beam of delight irradiated his face.

"Do you know, I believe you're right! Famous! In all the papers. I shall take your advice, M. Poirot. The money will be most agreeable—most agreeable. I shall have a little holiday. . . . And then I want to give a nice wedding present to Lily Marbury—a dear girl—really a dear girl, M. Poirot."

Poirot patted him encouragingly on the shoulder.

"You are quite right. Enjoy yourself. And—just a little word—what about a visit to an oculist. Those headaches, it is probably that you want new glasses."

"You think that it may have been that all the time?"

"I do."

Mr. Cust shook him warmly by the hand.

"You're a very great man, M. Poirot."

Poirot, as usual, did not disdain the compliment. He did not even succeed in looking modest.

When Mr. Cust had strutted importantly out, my old friend smiled across at me.

"So, Hastings—we went hunting once more, did we not? *Vive le sport.*"

THE
MURDER ON
THE LINKS

TO MY HUSBAND

A fellow enthusiast for detective stories, and to whom I am indebted for much helpful advice and criticism

CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

I A FELLOW TRAVELLER 179

II AN APPEAL FOR HELP 184

III AT THE VILLA GENEVIÈVE 193

IV THE LETTER SIGNED "BELLA" 201

V MRS. RENAULD'S STORY 207

VI THE SCENE OF THE CRIME 214

VII THE MYSTERIOUS MADAME DAUBREUIL 219

VIII AN UNEXPECTED MEETING 228

IX M. GIRAUD FINDS SOME CLUES 235

X GABRIEL STONOR 241

XI JACK RENAULD 246

XII POIROT ELUCIDATES CERTAIN POINTS 255

XIII THE GIRL WITH THE ANXIOUS EYES 261

XIV THE SECOND BODY 268

XV A PHOTOGRAPH 273

XVI THE BEROLDY CASE 279

XVII WE MAKE FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS 283

XVIII GIRAUD ACTS 288

XIX I USE MY GREY CELLS 293

XX AN AMAZING STATEMENT 297

XXI HERCULE POIROT ON THE CASE 304

XXII I FIND LOVE 309

XXIII DIFFICULTIES AHEAD 316

XXIV "SAVE HIM!" 320

XXV AN UNEXPECTED DÉNOUEMENT 326

XXVI I RECEIVE A LETTER 330

XXVII JACK RENAULD'S STORY 333

XXVIII JOURNEY'S END 342

CHAPTER I

A FELLOW TRAVELLER

I BELIEVE that a well-known anecdote exists to the effect that a young writer, determined to make the commencement of his story forcible and original enough to catch and rivet the attention of the most *blasé* of editors, penned the following sentence:

" 'Hell!' said the Duchess."

Strangely enough, this tale of mine opens in much the same fashion. Only the lady who gave utterance to the exclamation was not a Duchess!

It was a day in early June. I had been transacting some business in Paris and was returning by the morning service to London where I was still sharing rooms with my old friend, the Belgian ex-detective, Hercule Poirot.

The Calais express was singularly empty—in fact, my own compartment held only one other traveller. I had made a somewhat hurried departure from the hotel and was busy assuring myself that I had duly collected all my traps when the train started. Up till then I had hardly noticed my companion, but I was now violently recalled to the fact of her existence. Jumping up from her seat, she let down the window and stuck her head out, withdrawing it a moment later with the brief and forcible ejaculation "Hell!"

Now I am old-fashioned. A woman, I consider, should be womanly. I have no patience with the modern neurotic girl who jazzes from morning to night, smokes likes a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush!

I looked up now, frowning slightly, into a pretty, impudent face, surmounted by a rakish little red hat. A thick cluster of black curls hid each ear. I judged that she was little more than seventeen, but her face was covered with powder, and her lips were quite impossibly scarlet.

Nothing abashed, she returned my glance, and executed an expressive grimace.

"Dear me, we've shocked the kind gentleman!" she observed to an imaginary audience. "I apologize for my language! Most unladylike, and all that, but Oh, Lord, there's reason enough for it! Do you know I've lost my only sister?"

"Really?" I said politely. "How unfortunate."

"He disapproves!" remarked the lady. "He disapproves utterly—of me, and my sister—which last is unfair, because he hasn't seen her!"

I opened my mouth, but she forestalled me.

"Say no more! Nobody loves me! I shall go into the garden and eat worms! Boohoo! I am crushed!"

She buried herself behind a large comic French paper. In a minute or two I saw her eyes stealthily peeping at me over the top. In spite of myself I could not help smiling, and in a minute she had tossed the paper aside, and had burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"I knew you weren't such a mutt as you looked," she cried.

Her laughter was so infectious that I could not help joining in, though I hardly cared for the word "mutt." The girl was certainly all that I most disliked, but that was no reason why I should make myself ridiculous by my attitude. I prepared to unbend. After all, she was decidedly pretty. . . .

"There! Now we're friends!" declared the minx. "Say you're sorry about my sister—"

"I am desolated!"

"That's a good boy!"

"Let me finish. I was going to add that, although I am desolated, I can manage to put up with her absence very well." I made a little bow.

But this most unaccountable of damsels frowned and shook her head.

"Cut it out. I prefer the 'dignified disapproval' stunt. Oh, your face! 'Not one of us,' it said. And you were right there—though, mind you, it's pretty hard to tell nowadays. It's not every one who can distinguish between a demi and a duchess. There now, I believe I've shocked you again! You've been dug out of the backwoods, you have. Not that I mind that. We could do with a few more of your sort. I just hate a fellow who gets fresh. It makes me mad."

She shook her head vigorously.

"What are you like when you're mad?" I inquired with a smile.

"A regular little devil! Don't care what I say, or what I do, either! I nearly did a chap in once Yes, really. He'd have deserved it too. Italian blood I've got. I shall get into trouble one of these days."

"Well," I begged, "don't get mad with me."

"I shan't. I like you—did the first moment I set eyes on you. But you looked so disapproving that I never thought we should make friends."

"Well, we have. Tell me something about yourself."

"I'm an actress. No—not the kind you're thinking of, lunching at the Savoy covered with jewellery, and with their photograph in every paper saying how much they love Madame So and So's face cream. I've been on the boards since I was a kid of six—tumbling."

"I beg your pardon," I said puzzled.

"Haven't you seen child acrobats?"

"Oh, I understand."

"I'm American born, but I've spent most of my life in England. We got a new show now—"

"We?"

"My sister and I. Sort of song and dance, and a bit of patter, and a dash of the old business thrown in. It's quite a new idea, and it hits them every time. There's to be money in it—"

My new acquaintance leaned forward, and discoursed volubly, a great many of her terms being quite unintelligible to me. Yet I found myself evincing an increasing interest in her. She seemed such a curious mixture of child and woman. Though perfectly worldly-wise, and able, as she expressed it, to take care of herself, there was yet something curiously ingenuous in her single-minded attitude towards life, and her whole-hearted determination to "make good." This glimpse of a world unknown to me was not without its charm, and I enjoyed seeing her vivid little face light up as she talked.

We passed through Amiens. The name awakened many memories. My companion seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of what was in my mind.

"Thinking of the War?"

I nodded.

"You were through it, I suppose?"

"Pretty well. I was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether. I had a half fledged Army job for a bit. I'm a sort of private secretary now to an M. P."

"My! That's brainy!"

"No, it isn't. There's really awfully little to do. Usually a couple of hours every day sees me through. It's dull work too. In fact, I don't know what I should do if I hadn't got something to fall back upon."

"Don't say you collect bugs!"

"No. I share rooms with a very interesting man. He's a Belgian—an ex-detective. He's set up as a private detective in London, and he's doing extraordinarily well. He's really a very marvellous little man. Time and again he has proved to be right where the official police have failed."

My companion listened with widening eyes.

"Isn't that interesting, now? I just adore crime. I go to all the mysteries on the movies. And when there's a murder on I just devour the papers."

"Do you remember the Styles Case?" I asked.

"Let me see, was that the old lady who was poisoned? Somewhere down in Essex?"

I nodded.

"That was Poirot's first big case. Undoubtedly, but for him, the murderer would have escaped scotfree. It was a most wonderful bit of detective work."

Warming to my subject, I ran over the heads of the affair, working up to the triumphant and unexpected dénouement. The girl listened spellbound. In fact, we were so absorbed that the train drew into Calais station before we realized it.

"My goodness gracious me!" cried my companion. "Where's my powder-puff?"

She proceeded to bedaub her face liberally, and then applied a stick of lip salve to her lips, observing the effect in a small pocket glass, and betraying not the faintest sign of self-consciousness.

"I say," I hesitated. "I dare say it's cheek on my part, but why do all that sort of thing?"

The girl paused in her operations, and stared at me with undisguised surprise.

"It isn't as though you weren't so pretty that you can afford to do without it," I said stammeringly.

"My dear boy! I've got to do it. All the girls do. Think I want to look like a little frump up from the country?" She took one last look in the mirror, smiled approval, and put it and her vanity-box away in her bag. "That's better. Keeping up appearances is a bit of a fag, I grant, but if a girl respects herself it's up to her not to let herself get slack."

To this essentially moral sentiment, I had no reply. A point of view makes a great difference.

I secured a couple of porters, and we alighted on the platform. My companion held out her hand.

"Good-bye, and I'll mind my language better in future."

"Oh, but surely you'll let me look after you on the boat?"

"Mayn't be on the boat. I've got to see whether that sister of mine got aboard after all anywhere. But thanks all the same."

"Oh, but we're going to meet again, surely? I—" I hesitated. "I want to meet your sister."

We both laughed.

"That's real nice of you. I'll tell her what you say. But I don't fancy we'll meet again. You've been very good to me on the journey, especially after I cheeked you as I did. But what your face expressed first thing is quite true. I'm not your kind. And that brings trouble—*I* know that well enough. . . ."

Her face changed. For the moment all the light-hearted gaiety died out of it. It looked angry—revengeful. . . .

"So good-bye," she finished, in a lighter tone.

"Aren't you even going to tell me your name?" I cried, as she turned away.

She looked over her shoulder. A dimple appeared in each cheek. She was like a lovely picture by Greuze.

"Cinderella," she said, and laughed.

But little did I think when and how I should see Cinderella again.

CHAPTER II

AN APPEAL FOR HELP

IT WAS five minutes past nine when I entered our joint sitting-room for breakfast on the following morning. My friend Poirot, exact to the minute as usual, was just tapping the shell of his second egg.

He beamed upon me as I entered.

"You have slept well, yes? You have recovered from the crossing so terrible? It is a marvel, almost you are exact this morning. *Pardon,* but your tie is not symmetrical. Permit that I rearrange him."

Elsewhere, I have described Hercule Poirot. An extraordinary little man! Height, five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For neatness of any kind, he had an absolute passion. To see an ornament set crooked, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one's attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. "Order" and "Method" were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: "The true work, it is done from *within. The little grey cells*—remember always the little grey cells, *mon ami!"*

I slipped into my seat, and remarked idly, in answer to Poirot's greeting, that an hour's sea passage from Calais to Dover could hardly be dignified by the epithet "terrible."

Poirot waved his egg-spoon in vigorous refutation of my remark.

"Du tout! If for an hour one experiences sensations and emotions of the most terrible, one has lived many hours! Does not one of your English poets say that time is counted, not by hours, but by heart-beats?"

"I fancy Browning was referring to something more romantic than sea sickness, though."

"Because he was an Englishman, an Islander to whom *la Manche* was nothing. Oh, you English! With *nous autres* it is different. Figure to yourself that a lady of my acquaintance at the beginning of the war fled to Ostend. There she had a terrible crisis of the nerves. Impossible to escape further except by crossing the sea! And she had a horror—*mais une horreur!*—of the sea! What was she to do? Daily *les Boches* were drawing nearer. Imagine to yourself the terrible situation!"

"What did she do?" I inquired curiously.

"Fortunately her husband was *homme pratique.* He was also very calm, the crises of the nerves, they affected him not. *Il l'a emportée simplement!* Naturally when she reached England she was prostrate, but she still breathed."

Poirot shook his head seriously. I composed my face as best I could.

Suddenly he stiffened and pointed a dramatic finger at the toast rack.

"Ah, par exemple, c'est trop fort!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"This piece of toast. You remark him not?" He whipped the offender out of the rack, and held it up for me to examine.

"Is it square? No. Is it a triangle? Again no. Is it even round? No. Is it of any shape remotely pleasing to the eye? What symmetry have we here? None."

"It's cut from a cottage loaf," I explained soothingly.

Poirot threw me a withering glance.

"What an intelligence has my friend Hastings!" he exclaimed sarcastically. "Comprehend you not that I have forbidden such a loaf—a loaf haphazard and shapeless, that no baker should permit himself to bake!"

I endeavoured to distract his mind.

"Anything interesting come by the post?"

Poirot shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

"I have not yet examined my letters, but nothing of interest arrives nowadays. The great criminals, the criminals of method, they do not exist. The cases I have been employed upon lately were *banal* to the last degree. In verity I am reduced to recovering lost lap-dogs for fashionable ladies! The last problem that presented any interest was that intricate little affair of the Yardly diamond, and that was—how many months ago, my friend?"

He shook his head despondently, and I roared with laughter.

"Cheer up, Poirot, the luck will change. Open your letters. For all you know, there may be a great Case looming on the horizon."

Poirot smiled, and taking up the neat little letter opener with which he opened his correspondence he slit the tops of the several envelopes that lay by his plate.

"A bill. Another bill. It is that I grow extravagant in my old age. Aha! a note from Japp."

"Yes?" I pricked up my ears. The Scotland Yard Inspector had more than once introduced us to an interesting case.

"He merely thanks me (in his fashion) for a little point in the Aberystwyth Case on which I was able to set him right. I am delighted to have been of service to him."

"How does he thank you?" I asked curiously, for I knew my Japp.

"He is kind enough to say that I am a wonderful sport for my age, and that he was glad to have had the chance of letting me in on the case."

This was so typical of Japp, that I could not forbear a chuckle. Poirot continued to read his correspondence placidly.

"A suggestion that I should give a lecture to our local boy scouts. The Countess of Forfanock will be obliged if I will call and see her. Another lap-dog without doubt! And now for the last. Ah—"

I looked up, quick to notice the change of tone. Poirot was reading attentively. In a minute he tossed the sheet over to me.

"This is out of the ordinary, *mon ami.* Read for yourself."

The letter was written on a foreign type of paper, in a bold characteristic hand:

"Villa Geneviève
Merlinville-sur-Mer
France

"DEAR SIR,

"I am in need of the services of a detective and, for reasons which I will give you later, do not wish to call in the official police. I have heard of you from several quarters, and all reports go to show that you are not only a man of decided ability, but one who also knows how to be discreet. I do not wish to trust details to the post, but, on account of a secret I possess, I go in daily fear of my life. I am convinced that the danger is imminent, and therefore I beg that you will lose no time in crossing to France. I will send a car to meet you at Calais, if you will wire me when you are arriving. I shall be obliged if you will drop all cases you have on hand, and devote yourself solely to my interests. I am prepared to pay any compensation necessary. I shall probably need your services for a considerable period of time, as it may be necessary for you to go out to Santiago, where I spent several years of my life. I shall be content for you to name your own fee.

"Assuring you once more that the matter is *urgent,*

"Yours faithfully
"P. T. RENAULD"

Below the signature was a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible: "For God's sake, come!"

I handed the letter back with quickened pulses.

"At last" I said. "Here is something distinctly out of the ordinary."

"Yes, indeed," said Poirot meditatively.

"You will go of course," I continued.

Poirot nodded. He was thinking deeply. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, and glanced up at the clock. His face was very grave.

"See you, my friend, there is no time to lose. The Continental express leaves Victoria at 11 o'clock. Do not agitate yourself. There is plenty of time. We can allow ten minutes for discussion. You accompany me, *n' est-ce pas?"*

"Well—"

"You told me yourself that your employer needed you not for the next few weeks."

"Oh, that's all right. But this Mr. Renauld hints strongly that his business is private."

"Ta-ta-ta I will manage M. Renauld. By the way, I seem to know the name?"

"There's a well-known South American millionaire fellow. His name's Renauld. I don't know whether it could be the same."

"But without doubt. That explains the mention of Santiago. Santiago is in Chile, and Chile it is in South America! Ah, but we progress finely."

"Dear me, Poirot," I said, my excitement rising, "I smell some goodly shekels in this. If we succeed, we shall make our fortunes!"

"Do not be too sure of that, my friend. A rich man and his money are not so easily parted. Me, I have seen a well-known millionaire turn out a tramful of people to seek for a dropped halfpenny."

I acknowledged the wisdom of this.

"In any case," continued Poirot, "it is not the money which attracts me here. Certainly it will be pleasant to have *carte blanche* in our investigations; one can be sure that way of wasting no time, but it is something a little bizarre in this problem which arouses my interest. You remarked the postscript? How did it strike you?"

I considered.

"Clearly he wrote the letter keeping himself well in hand, but at the end his self-control snapped and, on the impulse of the moment, he scrawled those four desperate words."

But my friend shook his head energetically.

"You are in error. See you not that while the ink of the signature is nearly black, that of the postscript is quite pale?"

"Well?" I said puzzled.

"Mon Dieu, mon ami, but use your little grey cells! Is it not obvious? M. Renauld wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he reread it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet."

"But why?"

"Parbleu! so that it should produce the effect upon me that it has upon you."

"What?"

"Mais, oui—to make sure of my coming! He reread the letter and was dissatisfied. It was not strong enough!"

He paused, and then added softly, his eyes shining with that green light that always betokened inward excitement: "And so, *mon ami,* since that postscript was added, not on impulse, but soberly, in cold blood, the urgency is very great, and we must reach him as soon as possible."

"Merlinville," I murmured thoughtfully. "I've heard of it, I think."

Poirot nodded.

"It is a quiet little place—but chic! It lies about mid-way between Bolougne and Calais. It is rapidly becoming the fashion. Rich English people who wish to be quiet are taking it up. M. Renauld has a house in England, I suppose?"

"Yes, In Rutland Gate, as far as I remember. Also a big place in the country, somewhere in Hertfordshire. But I really know very little about him, he doesn't do much in a social way. I believe he has large South American interests in the City, and has spent most of his life out in Chile and the Argentino."

"Well, we shall hear all details from the man himself. Come, let us pack. A small suit-case each, and then a taxi to Victoria."

"And the Countess?" I inquired with a smile.

"Ah! *je me'en fiche!* Her case was certainly not interesting."

"Why so sure of that?"

"Because in that case she would have come, not written. A woman cannot wait—always remember that, Hastings."

Eleven o'clock saw our departure from Victoria on our way to Dover. Before starting Poirot had despatched a telegram to Mr. Renauld giving the time of our arrival at Calais.

"I'm surprised you haven't invested in a few bottles of some sea sick remedy, Poirot," I observed maliciously, as I recalled our conversation at breakfast.

My friend, who was anxiously scanning the weather, turned a reproachful face upon me.

"Is it that you have forgotten the method most excellent of Laverguier? His system, I practise it always. One balances oneself, if you remember, turning the head from left to right, breathing in and out, counting six between each breath."

"H'm," I demurred. "You'll be rather tired of balancing yourself and counting six by the time you get to Santiago, or Buenos Ayres, or wherever it is you land."

"Quelle idée! You do not figure to yourself that I shall go to Santiago?"

"Mr. Renauld suggests it in his letter."

"He did not know the methods of Hercule Poirot. I do not run to and fro, making journeys, and agitating myself. My work is done from within —*here*—" he tapped his forehead significantly.

As usual, this remark roused my argumentative faculty.

"It's all very well, Poirot, but I think you are falling into the habit of despising certain things too much. A finger-print has led sometimes to the arrest and conviction of a murderer."

"And has, without doubt, hanged more than one innocent man," remarked Poirot dryly.

"But surely the study of finger-prints and foot-prints, cigarette ash, different kinds of mud, and other clues that comprise the minute observation of details—all these are of vital importance?"

"But certainly. I have never said otherwise. The trained observer, the expert, without doubt he is useful! But the others, the Hercules Poirots, they are above the experts! To them the experts bring the facts, their business is the method of the crime, its logical deduction, the proper sequence and order of the facts; above all, the true psychology of the case. You have hunted the fox, yes?"

"I have hunted a bit, now and again," I said, rather bewildered by this abrupt change of subject. "Why?"

"Eh bien, this hunting of the fox, you need the dogs, no?"

"Hounds," I corrected gently. "Yes, of course."

"But yet," Poirot wagged his finger at me. "You did not descend from your horse and run along the ground smelling with your nose and uttering loud Ow Ows?"

In spite of myself I laughed immoderately. Poirot nodded in a satisfied manner.

"So. You leave the work of the d—hounds to the hounds. Yet you demand that I, Hercule Poirot, should make myself ridiculous by lying down (possibly on damp grass) to study hypothetical footprints, and should scoop up cigarette ash when I do not know one kind from the other. Remember the Plymouth Express mystery. The good Japp departed to make a survey of the railway line. When he returned, I, without having moved from my apartments, was able to tell him exactly what he had found."

"So you are of the opinion that Japp wasted his time."

"Not at all, since his evidence confirmed my theory. But *I* should have wasted my time if *I* had gone. It is the same with so called 'experts.' Remember the handwriting testimony in the Cavendish Case. One counsel's questioning brings out testimony as to the resemblances, the defence brings evidence to show dissimilarity. All the language is very technical. And the result? What we all knew in the first place. The writing was very like that of John Cavendish. And the psychological mind is faced with the question 'Why?' Because it was actually his? Or because some one wished us to think it was his? I answered that question, *mon ami,* and answered it correctly."

And Poirot, having effectually silenced, if not convinced, me, leaned back with a satisfied air.

On the boat, I knew better than to disturb my friend's solitude. The weather was gorgeous, and the sea as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond, so I was hardly surprised to hear that Laverguier's method had once more justified itself when a smiling Poirot joined me on disembarking at Calais. A disappointment was in store for us, as no car had been sent to meet us, but Poirot put this down to his telegram having been delayed in transit.

"Since it is *carte blanche,* we will hire a car," he said cheerfully. And a few minutes later saw us creaking and jolting along, in the most ramshackle of automobiles that ever plied for hire, in the direction of Merlinville.

My spirits were at their highest.

"What gorgeous air!" I exclaimed. "This promises to be a delightful trip."

"For you, yes. For me, I have work to do, remember, at our journey's end."

"Bah!" I said cheerfully. "You will discover all, ensure this Mr. Renauld's safety, run the would-be assassins to earth, and all will finish in a blaze of glory."

"You are sanguine, my friend."

"Yes, I feel absolutely assured of success. Are you not the one and only Hercule Poirot?"

But my little friend did not rise to the bait. He was observing me gravely.

"You are what the Scotch people call 'fey,' Hastings. It presages disaster."

"Nonsense. At any rate, you do not share my feelings."

"No, but I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I do not know. But I have a premonition—a *je ne sais quoi!*"

He spoke so gravely, that I was impressed in spite of myself.

"I have a feeling," he said slowly, "that this is going to be a big affair—a long, troublesome problem that will not be easy to work out."

I would have questioned him further, but we were just coming into the little town of Merlinville, and we slowed up to inquire the way to the Villa Geneviève.

"Straight on, monsieur, through the town. The Villa Geneviève is about half a mile the other side. You cannot miss it. A big Villa, overlooking the sea."

We thanked our informant, and drove on, leaving the town behind. A fork in the road brought us to a second halt. A peasant was trudging towards us, and we waited for him to come up to us in order to ask the way again. There was a tiny Villa standing right by the road, but it was too small and dilapidated to be the one we wanted. As we waited, the gate of it swung open and a girl came out.

The peasant was passing us now, and the driver leaned forward from his seat and asked for direction.

"The Villa Geneviève? Just a few steps up this road to the right, monsieur. You could see it if it were not for the curve."

The chauffeur thanked him, and started the car again. My eyes were fascinated by the girl who still stood, with one hand on the gate, watching us. I am an admirer of beauty, and here was one whom nobody could have passed without remark. Very tall, with the proportions of a young goddess, her uncovered golden head gleaming in the sunlight, I swore to myself that she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. As we swung up the rough road, I turned my head to look after her.

"By Jove, Poirot," I exclaimed, "did you see that young goddess."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Ça commence!" he murmured. "Already you have seen a goddess!"

"But, hang it all, wasn't she?"

"Possibly. I did not remark the fact."

"Surely you noticed her?"

"Mon ami, two people rarely see the same thing. You, for instance, saw a goddess. I—" he hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I saw only a girl with anxious eyes," said Poirot gravely.

But at that moment we drew up at a big green gate, and, simultaneously, we both uttered an exclamation. Before it stood an imposing *sergent de ville.* He held up his hand to bar our way.

"You cannot pass, monsieurs."

"But we wish to see Mr. Renauld," I cried. "We have an appointment. This is his Villa, isn't it?"

"Yes, monsieur, but—"

Poirot leaned forward.

"But what?"

"M. Renauld was murdered this morning."

CHAPTER III

AT THE VILLA GENEVIÈVE

In a moment Poirot had leapt from the car, his eyes blazing with excitement. He caught the man by the shoulder.

"What is that you say? Murdered? When? How?"

The *sergent de ville* drew himself up.

"I cannot answer any questions, monsieur."

"True. I comprehend." Poirot reflected for a minute. "The Commissary of Police, he is without doubt within?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Poirot took out a card, and scribbled a few words on it.

"Voila! Will you have the goodness to see that this card is sent in to the commissary at once?"

The man took it and, turning his head over his shoulder, whistled. In a few seconds a comrade joined him and was handed Poirot's message. There was a wait of some minutes, and then a short stout man with a huge moustache came bustling down to the gate. The *sergent de ville* saluted and stood aside.

"My dear M. Poirot," cried the new-comer, "I am delighted to see you. Your arrival is most opportune."

Poirot's face had lighted up.

"M. Bex! This is indeed a pleasure." He turned to me. "This is an English friend of mine, Captain Hastings—M. Lucien Bex."

The commissary and I bowed to each other ceremoniously, then M. Bex turned once more to Poirot.

"Mon vieux, I have not seen you since 1909, that time in Ostend. I heard that you had left the Force?"

"So I have. I run a private business in London."

"And you say you have information to give which may assist us?"

"Possibly you know it already. You were aware that I had been sent for?"

"No. By whom?"

"The dead man. It seems he knew an attempt was going to be made on his life. Unfortunately he sent for me too late."

"Sacri tonnerre!" ejaculated the Frenchman. "So he foresaw his own murder? That upsets our theories considerably! But come inside."

He held the gate open, and we commenced walking towards the house. M. Bex continued to talk:

"The examining magistrate, M. Hautet, must hear of this at once. He has just finished examining the scene of the crime and is about to begin his interrogations. A charming man. You will like him. Most sympathetic. Original in his methods, but an excellent judge."

"When was the crime committed?" asked Poirot.

"The body was discovered this morning about nine o'clock. Madame Renauld's evidence, and that of the doctors goes to show that the death must have occurred about 2 A. M. But enter, I pray of you."

We had arrived at the steps which led up to the front door of the Villa. In the hall another *sergent de ville* was sitting. He rose at sight of the commissary.

"Where is M. Hautet now?" inquired the latter.

"In the *salon,* monsieur."

M. Bex opened a door to the left of the hall, and we passed in. M. Hautet and his clerk were sitting at a big round table. They looked up as we entered. The commissary introduced us, and explained our presence.

M. Hautet, the Juge d'Instruction, was a tall, gaunt man, with piercing dark eyes, and a neatly cut grey beard, which he had a habit of caressing as he talked. Standing by the mantelpiece was an elderly man, with slightly stooping shoulders, who was introduced to us as Dr. Durand.

"Most extraordinary," remarked M. Hautet, as the commissary finished speaking. "You have the letter here, monsieur?"

Poirot handed it to him, and the magistrate read it.

"H'm. He speaks of a secret. What a pity he was not more explicit. We are much indebted to you, M. Poirot. I hope you will do us the honour of assisting us in our investigations. Or are you obliged to return to London?"

"M. le juge, I propose to remain. I did not arrive in time to prevent my client's death, but I feel myself bound in honour to discover the assassin."

The magistrate bowed.

"These sentiments do you honour. Also, without doubt, Madame Renauld will wish to retain your services. We are expecting M. Giraud from the Sureté in Paris any moment, and I am sure that you and he will be able to give each other mutual assistance in your investigations. In the meantime, I hope that you will do me the honour to be present at my interrogations, and I need hardly say that if there is any assistance you require it is at your disposal."

"I thank you monsieur. You will comprehend that at present I am completely in the dark. I know nothing whatever."

M. Hautet nodded to the commissary, and the latter took up the tale:

"This morning, the old servant Françoise, on descending to start her work, found the front door ajar. Feeling a momentary alarm as to burglars, she looked into the dining-room, but seeing the silver was safe she thought no more about it, concluding that her master had, without doubt, risen early, and gone for a stroll."

"Pardon, monsieur, for interrupting, but was that a common practice of his?"

"No, it was not, but old Françoise has the common idea as regards the English—that they are mad, and liable to do the most unaccountable things at any moment! Going to call her mistress as usual, a younger maid, Léonie, was horrified to discover her gagged and bound, and almost at the same moment news was brought that M. Renauld's body had been discovered, stone dead, stabbed in the back."

"Where?"

"That is one of the most extraordinary features of the case. M. Poirot, the body was lying, face downwards, *in an open grave.*"

"What?"

"Yes. The pit was freshly dug—just a few yards outside the boundary of the Villa grounds."

"And he had been dead—how long?"

Dr. Durand answered this.

"I examined the body this morning at ten o'clock. Death must have taken place at least seven, and possibly ten hours previously."

"H'm, that fixes it at between midnight and 3 A. M."

"Exactly, and Madame Renauld's evidence places it at after 2 A. M. which narrows the field still further. Death must have been instantaneous, and naturally could not have been self-inflicted."

Poirot nodded, and the commissary resumed:

"Madame Renauld was hastily freed from the cords that bound her by the horrified servants. She was in a terrible condition of weakness, almost unconscious from the pain of her bonds. It appears that two masked men entered the bedroom, gagged and bound her, whilst forcibly abducting her husband. This we know at second hand from the servants. On hearing the tragic news, she fell at once into an alarming state of agitation. On arrival, Dr. Durand immediately prescribed a sedative, and we have not yet been able to question her. But without doubt she will awake more calm, and be equal to bearing the strain of the interrogation."

The commissary paused.

"And the inmates of the house, monsieur?"

"There is old Françoise, the housekeeper, she lived for many years with the former owners of the Villa Geneviève. Then there are two young girls, sisters, Denise and Léonie Oulard. Their home is in Merlinville, and they come of the most respectable parents. Then there is the chauffeur whom M. Renauld brought over from England with him, but he is away on a holiday. Finally there are Madame Renauld and her son, M. Jack Renauld. He, too, is away from home at present."

Poirot bowed his head. M. Hautet spoke:

"Marchand!"

The *sergent de ville* appeared.

"Bring in the woman Françoise."

The man saluted, and disappeared. In a moment or two, he returned, escorting the frightened Françoise.

"Your name is Françoise Arrichet?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You have been a long time in service at the Villa Geneviève?"

"Eleven years with Madame la Vicomtesse. Then when she sold the Villa this spring, I consented to remain on with the English milor. Never did I imagine—"

The magistrate cut her short.

"Without doubt, without doubt. Now, Françoise, in this matter of the front door, whose business was it to fasten it at night?"

"Mine, monsieur. Always I saw to it myself."

"And last night?"

"I fastened it as usual."

"You are sure of that?"

"I swear it by the blessed saints, monsieur."

"What time would that be?"

"The same time as usual, half-past ten, monsieur."

"What about the rest of the household, had they gone up to bed?"

"Madame had retired some time before. Denise and Léonie went up with me. Monsieur was still in his study."

"Then, if any one unfastened the door afterwards, it must have been M. Renauld himself?"

Françoise shrugged her broad shoulders.

"What should he do that for? With robbers and assassins passing every minute! A nice idea! Monsieur was not an imbecile. It is not as though he had had to let *cette dame* out—"

The magistrate interrupted sharply:

"Cette dame? What lady do you mean?"

"Why, the lady who came to see him."

"Had a lady been to see him that evening?"

"But yes, monsieur—and many other evenings as well."

"Who was she? Did you know her?"

A rather cunning look spread over the woman's face.

"How should I know who it was?" she grumbled. "I did not let her in last night."

"Aha!" roared the examining magistrate, bringing his hand down with a bang on the table. "You would trifle with the police, would you? I demand that you tell me at once the name of this woman who came to visit M. Renauld in the evenings."

"The police—the police," grumbled Françoise. "Never did I think that I should be mixed up with the police. But I know well enough who she was. It was Madame Daubreuil."

The commissary uttered an exclamation, and leaned forward as though in utter astonishment.

"Madame Daubreuil—from the Villa Marguerite just down the road?"

"That is what I said, monsieur. Oh, she is a pretty one, *cellela!*" The old woman tossed her head scornfully.

"Madame Daubreuil," murmured the commissary. "Impossible."

"Voilà," grumbled Françoise. "That is all you get for-telling the truth."

"Not at all," said the examining magistrate soothingly. "We were surprised, that is all. Madame Daubreuil then, and Monsieur Renauld, they were—" he paused delicately. "Eh? It was that without doubt?"

"How should I know? But what will you? Monsieur, he was *milor anglais—très riche—* and Madame Daubreuil, she was poor, that one—and *très chic* for all that she lives so quietly with her daughter. Not a doubt of it, she has had her history! She is no longer young, but *ma foi!* I who speak to you have seen the men's heads turn after her as she goes down the street. Besides lately, she has had more money to spend—all the town knows it. The little economies, they are at an end." And Françoise shook her head with an air of unalterable certainty.

M. Hautet stroked his beard reflectively.

"And Madame Renauld?" he asked at length. "How did she take this—friendship."

Françoise shrugged her shoulders.

"She was always most amiable—most polite. One would say that she suspected nothing. But all the same, is it not so, the heart suffers, monsieur? Day by day, I have watched Madame grow paler and thinner. She was not the same woman who arrived here a month ago. Monsieur, too, has changed. He also has had his worries. One could see that he was on the brink of a crisis of the nerves. And who could wonder, with an affair conducted in such a fashion? No reticence, no discretion. *Style anglais,* without doubt!"

I bounded indignantly in my seat, but the examining magistrate was continuing his questions, undistracted by side issues.

"You say that M. Renauld had not to let Madame Daubreuil out? Had she left, then?"

"Yes, monsieur. I heard them come out of the study and go to the door. Monsieur said good night, and shut the door after her."

"What time was that?"

"About twenty-five minutes after ten, monsieur."

"Do you know when M. Renauld went to bed?"

"I heard him come up about ten minutes after we did. The stair creaks so that one hears every one who goes up and down."

"And that is all? You heard no sound of disturbance during the night?"

"Nothing whatever, monsieur."

"Which of the servants came down the first in the morning?"

"I did, monsieur. At once I saw the door swinging open."

"What about the other downstairs windows, were they all fastened?"

"Every one of them. There was nothing suspicious or out of place anywhere."

"Good, Françoise, you can go."

The old woman shuffled towards the door. On the threshold she looked back.

"I will tell you one thing, monsieur. That Madame Daubreuil she is a bad one! Oh, yes, one woman knows about another. She is a bad one, remember that." And, shaking her head sagely, Françoise left the room.

"Léonie Oulard," called the magistrate.

Léonie appeared dissolved in tears, and inclined to be hysterical. M. Hautet dealt with her adroitly. Her evidence was mainly concerned with the discovery of her mistress gagged and bound, of which she gave rather an exaggerated account. She, like Françoise, had heard nothing during the night.

Her sister, Denise, succeeded her. She agreed that her master had changed greatly of late.

"Every day he became more and more morose. He ate less. He was always depressed." But Denise had her own theory. "Without doubt it was the Mafia he had on his track! Two masked men—who else could it be? A terrible society that!"

"It is, of course, possible," said the magistrate smoothly. "Now, my girl, was it you who admitted Madame Daubreuil to the house last night?"

"Not *last* night, monsieur, the night before."

"But Françoise has just told us that Madame Daubreuil was here last night?"

"No, monsieur. A lady *did* come to see M. Renauld last night, but it was not Madame Daubreuil."

Surprised, the magistrate insisted, but the girl held firm. She knew Madame Daubreuil perfectly by sight. This lady was dark also, but shorter, and much younger. Nothing could shake her statement.

"Had you ever seen this lady before?"

"Never, monsieur." And then the girl added diffidently: "But I think she was English."

"English?"

"Yes, monsieur. She asked for M. Renauld in quite good French, but the accent—one can always tell it, *n'est-ce pas?* Besides when they came out of the study they were speaking in English."

"Did you hear what they said? Could you understand it, I mean?"

"Me, I speak the English very well," said Denise with pride. "The lady was speaking too fast for me to catch what she said, but I heard Monsieur's last words as he opened the door for her." She paused, and then repeated carefully and laboriously: " 'Yeas—yeas—butt for Gaud's sake go nauw!' "

"Yes, yes, but for God's sake go now!" repeated the magistrate.

He dismissed Denise and, after a moment or two for consideration, recalled Françoise. To her he propounded the question as to whether she had not made a mistake in fixing the night of Madame Daubreuil's visit. Françoise, however, proved unexpectedly obstinate. It was last night that Madame Daubreuil had come. Without a doubt it was she. Denise wished to make herself interesting, *voilà tout!* So she had cooked up this fine tale about a strange lady. Airing her knowledge of English too! Probably Monsieur had never spoken that sentence in English at all, and even if he had, it proved nothing, for Madame Daubreuil spoke English perfectly, and generally used that language when talking to M. and Madame Renauld. "You see, M. Jack, the son of Monsieur, was usually here, and he spoke the French very badly."

The magistrate did not insist. Instead he inquired about the chauffeur, and learned that only yesterday, M. Renauld had declared that he was not likely to use the car, and that Masters might just as well take a holiday.

A perplexed frown was beginning to gather between Poirot's eyes.

"What is it?" I whispered.

He shook his head impatiently, and asked a question:

"Pardon, M. Bex, but without doubt M. Renauld could drive the car himself?"

The commissary looked over at Françoise, and the old woman replied promptly:

"No, Monsieur did not drive himself."

Poirot's frown deepened.

"I wish you would tell me what is worrying you," I said impatiently.

"See you not? In his letter M. Renauld speaks of sending the car for me to Calais."

"Perhaps he meant a hired car," I suggested.

"Doubtless that is so. But why hire a car when you have one of your own. Why choose yesterday to send away the chauffeur on a holiday—suddenly, at a moment's notice? Was it that for some reason he wanted him out of the way before we arrived?"

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTER SIGNED "BELLA"

FRANÇOISE HAD left the room. The magistrate was drumming thoughtfully on the table.

"M. Bex," he said at length, "here we have directly conflicting testimony. Which are we to believe, Françoise or Denise?"

"Denise," said the commissary decidedly. "It was she who let the visitor in. Françoise is old and obstinate, and has evidently taken a dislike to Madame Daubreuil. Besides, our own knowledge tends to show that Renauld was entangled with another woman."

"Tiens!" cried M. Hautet. "We have forgotten to inform M. Poirot of that." He searched amongst the papers on the table, and finally handed the one he was in search of to my friend. "This letter, M. Poirot, we found in the pocket of the dead man's overcoat."

Poirot took it and unfolded it. It was somewhat worn and crumbled, and was written in English in a rather unformed hand:

"My dearest one:

"Why have you not written for so long? You do love me still, don't you? Your letters lately have been so different, cold and strange, and now this long silence. It makes me afraid. If you were to stop loving me! But that's impossible—what a silly kid I am—always imagining things! But if you *did* stop loving me, I don't know what I should do—kill myself perhaps! I couldn't live without you. Sometimes I fancy another woman is coming between us. Let her look out, that's all—and you too! I'd as soon kill you as let her have you! I mean it.

"But there, I'm writing high-flown nonsense. You love me, and I love you—yes, love you, love you, love you!

"Your own adoring
"BELLA."

There was no address or date. Poirot handed it back with a grave face.

"And the assumption is, M. le juge—?"

The examining magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

"Obviously M. Renauld was entangled with this Englishwoman—Bella. He comes over here, meets Madame Daubreuil, and starts an intrigue with her. He cools off to the other, and she instantly suspects something. This letter contains a distinct threat. M. Poirot, at first sight the case seemed simplicity itself. Jealousy! The fact that M. Renauld was stabbed in the back seemed to point distinctly to its being a woman's crime."

Poirot nodded.

"The stab in the back, yes—but not the grave! That was laborious work, hard work—no woman dug that grave, monsieur. That was a man's doing."

The commissary exclaimed excitedly: "Yes, yes, you are right. We did not think of that."

"As I said," continued M. Hautet, "at first sight the case seemed simple, but the masked men, and the letter you received from M. Renauld complicate matters. Here we seem to have an entirely different set of circumstances, with no relationship between the two. As regards the letter written to yourself, do you think it is possible that it referred in any way to this 'Bella', and her threats?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Hardly. A man like M. Renauld, who has led an adventurous life in out-of-the-way places, would not be likely to ask for protection against a woman."

The examining magistrate nodded his head emphatically.

"My view exactly. Then we must look for the explanation of the letter—"

"In Santiago," finished the commissary. "I shall cable without delay to the police in that city, requesting full details of the murdered man's life out there, his love affairs, his business transactions, his friendships, and any enmities he may have incurred. It will be strange if, after that, we do not hold a clue to his mysterious murder."

The commissary looked round for approval.

"Excellent," said Poirot appreciatively.

"His wife, too, may be able to give us a pointer," added the magistrate.

"You have found no other letters from this Bella amongst M. Renauld's effects?" asked Poirot.

"No. Of course one of our first proceedings was to search through his private papers in the study. We found nothing of interest, however. All seemed square and above-board. The only thing at all out of the ordinary was his will. Here it is."

Poirot ran through the document.

"So. A legacy of a thousand pounds to Mr. Stonor—who is he, by the way?"

"M. Renauld's secretary. He remained in England, but was over here once or twice for a week-end."

"And everything else left unconditionally to his beloved wife, Eloise.

Simply drawn up, but perfectly legal. Witnessed by the two servants, Denise and Françoise. Nothing so very unusual about that." He handed it back.

"Perhaps," began Bex, "you did not notice—"

"The date?" twinkled Poirot. "But yes, I noticed it. A fortnight ago. Possibly it marks his first intimation of danger. Many rich men die intestate through never considering the likelihood of their demise. But it is dangerous to draw conclusions prematurely. It points, however, to his having a real liking and fondness for his wife, in spite of his amorous intrigues."

"Yes," said M. Hautet doubtfully. "But it is possibly a little unfair on his son, since it leaves him entirely dependent on his mother. If she were to marry again, and her second husband obtained an ascendancy over her, this boy might never touch a penny of his father's money."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Man is a vain animal. M. Renauld figured to himself, without doubt, that his widow would never marry again. As to the son, it may have been a wise precaution to leave the money in his mother's hands. The sons of rich men are proverbially wild."

"It may be as you say. Now, M. Poirot, you would without doubt like to visit the scene of the crime. I am sorry that the body has been removed, but of course photographs have been taken from every conceivable angle, and will be at your disposal as soon as they are available."

"I thank you, monsieur, for all your courtesy."

The commissary rose.

"Come with me, monsieurs."

He opened the door, and bowed ceremoniously to Poirot to precede him. Poirot, with equal politeness, drew back and bowed to the commissary.

"Monsieur."

"Monsieur."

At last they got out into the hall.

"That room there, it is the study, *hien?*" asked Poirot suddenly, nodding towards the door opposite.

"Yes. You would like to see it?" He threw the door open as he spoke, and we entered.

The room which M. Renauld had chosen for his own particular use was small, but furnished with great taste and comfort. A businesslike writing desk, with many pigeon holes, stood in the window. Two large leather-covered armchairs faced the fireplace, and between them was a round table covered with the latest books and magazines. Bookshelves lined two of the walls, and at the end of the room opposite the window there was a handsome oak sideboard with a tantalus on top. The curtains and *portière* were of a soft dull green, and the carpet matched them in tone.

Poirot stood a moment taking in the room, then he stepped forward, passed his hand lightly over the backs of the leather chairs, picked up a magazine from the table, and drew a finger gingerly over the surface of the oak sideboard. His face expressed complete approval.

"No dust?" I asked, with a smile.

He beamed on me, appreciative of my knowledge of his peculiarities.

"Not a particle, *mon ami!* And for once, perhaps, it is a pity!"

His sharp, birdlike eyes darted here and there.

"Ah!" he remarked suddenly, with an intonation of relief. "The hearth-rug is crooked," and he bent down to straighten it.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and rose. In his hand he held a small fragment of paper.

"In France, as in England," he remarked, "the domestics omit to sweep under the mats!"

Bex took the fragment from him, and I came closer to examine it.

"You recognize it—eh, Hastings?"

I shook my head, puzzled—and yet that particular shade of pink paper was very familiar.

The commissary's mental processes were quicker than mine.

"A fragment of a cheque," he exclaimed.

The piece of paper was roughly about two inches square. On it was written in ink the word "Duveen."

"Bien," said Bex. "This cheque was payable to, or drawn by, one named Duveen."

"The former, I fancy," said Poirot, "for, if I am not mistaken, the handwriting is that of M. Renauld."

That was soon established, by comparing it with a memorandum from the desk.

"Dear me," murmured the commissary, with a crest-fallen air, "I really cannot imagine how I came to overlook this."

Poirot laughed.

"The moral of that is, always look under the mats! My friend Hastings here will tell you that anything in the least crooked is a torment to me. As soon as I saw that the hearth-rug was out of the straight, I said to myself: '*Tiens!*' The leg of the chair caught it in being pushed back. Possibly there may be something beneath it which the good Françoise overlooked.' "

"Françoise?"

"Or Denise, or Léonie. Whoever did this room. Since there is no dust, the room *must* have been done this morning. I reconstruct the incident like this. Yesterday, possibly last night, M. Renauld drew a cheque to the order of some one named Duveen. Afterwards it was torn up, and scattered on the floor. This morning—" But M. Bex was already pulling impatiently at the bell.

Françoise answered it. Yes, there had been a lot of pieces of paper on the floor. What had she done with them? Put them in the kitchen stove of course! What else?

With a gesture of despair, Bex dismissed her. Then, his face lightening, he ran to the desk. In a minute he was hunting through the dead man's cheque book. Then he repeated his former gesture. The last counterfoil was blank.

"Courage!" cried Poirot, clapping him on the back. "Without doubt, Madame Renauld will be able to tell us all about this mysterious person named Duveen."

The commissary's face cleared. "That is true. Let us proceed."

As we turned to leave the room, Poirot remarked casually: "It was here that M. Renauld received his guest last night, eh?"

"It was—but how did you know?"

"By *this.* I found it on the back of the leather chair." And he held up between his finger and thumb a long black hair—a woman's hair!

M. Bex took us out by the back of the house to where there was a small shed leaning against the house. He produced a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

"The body is here. We moved it from the scene of the crime just before you arrived, as the photographers had done with it."

He opened the door and we passed in. The murdered man lay on the ground, with a sheet over him. M. Bex dexterously whipped off the covering. Renauld was a man of medium height, slender and lithe in figure. He looked about fifty years of age, and his dark hair was plentifully streaked with grey. He was clean shaven with a long thin nose, and eyes set rather close together, and his skin was deeply bronzed, as that of a man who had spent most of his life beneath tropical skies. His lips were drawn back from his teeth and an expression of absolute amazement and terror was stamped on the livid features.

"One can see by his face that he was stabbed in the back," remarked Poirot.

Very gently, he turned the dead man over. There, between the shoulder-blades, staining the light fawn overcoat, was a round dark patch. In the middle of it there was a slit in the cloth. Poirot examined it narrowly.

"Have you any idea with what weapon the crime was committed?"

"It was left in the wound." The commissary reached down a large glass jar. In it was a small object that looked to me more like a paper knife than anything else. It had a black handle, and a narrow shining blade. The whole thing was not more than ten inches long. Poirot tested the discoloured point gingerly with his finger tip.

"Ma foi! but it is sharp! A nice easy little tool for murder!"

"Unfortunately, we could find no trace of finger-prints on it," remarked Bex regretfully. "The murderer must have worn gloves."

"Of course he did," said Poirot contemptuously. "Even in Santiago they know enough for that. The veriest amateur of an English Mees knows it—thanks to the publicity the Bertillon system has been given in the Press. All the same, it interests me very much that there were no finger-prints. It is so amazingly simple to leave the finger-prints of some one else! And then the police are happy." He shook his head. "I very much fear our criminal is not a man of method—either that or he was pressed for time. But we shall see."

He let the body fall back into its original position.

"He wore only underclothes under his overcoat, I see," he remarked.

"Yes, the examining magistrate thinks that is rather a curious point."

At this minute there was a tap on the door which Bex had closed after him. He strode forward and opened it. Françoise was there. She endeavoured to peep in with ghoulish curiosity.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Bex impatiently.

"Madame. She sends a message that she is much recovered, and is quite ready to receive the examining magistrate."

"Good," said M. Bex briskly. "Tell M. Hautet and say that we will come at once."

Poirot lingered a moment, looking back towards the body. I thought for a moment that he was going to apostrophize it, to declare aloud his determination never to rest till he had discovered the murderer. But when he spoke, it was tamely and awkwardly, and his comment was ludicrously inappropriate to the solemnity of the moment.

"He wore his overcoat very long," he said constrainedly.

CHAPTER V

MRS. RENAULD'S STORY

We found M. Hautet awaiting us in the hall, and we all proceeded upstairs together, Françoise marching ahead to show us the way. Poirot went up in a zigzag fashion which puzzled me, until he whispered with a grimace:

"No wonder the servants heard M. Renauld mounting the stairs; not a board of them but creaks fit to wake the dead!"

At the head of the staircase, a small passage branched off.

"The servants' quarters," explained Bex.

We continued along a corridor, and Françoise tapped on the last door to the right of it.

A faint voice bade us enter, and we passed into a large sunny apartment looking out towards the sea, which showed blue and sparkling about a quarter of a mile distant.

On a couch, propped up with cushions, and attended by Dr. Durand, lay a tall, striking-looking woman. She was middle-aged, and her once dark hair was now almost entirely silvered, but the intense vitality and strength of her personality would have made itself felt anywhere. You knew at once that you were in the presence of what the French call *"une maîtresse femme."*

She greeted us with a dignified inclination of the head.

"Pray be seated, monsieurs."

We took chairs, and the magistrate's clerk established himself at a round table.

"I hope, madame," began M. Hautet, "that it will not distress you unduly to relate to us what occurred last night?"

"Not at all, monsieur. I know the value of time, if these scoundrelly assassins are to be caught and punished."

"Very well, madame. It will fatigue you less, I think, if I ask you questions and you confine yourself to answering them. At what time did you go to bed last night?"

"At half-past nine, monsieur. I was tired."

"And your husband?"

"About an hour later, I fancy."

"Did he seem disturbed—upset in any way?"

"No, not more than usual."

"What happened then?"

"We slept. I was awakened by a hand being pressed over my mouth. I tried to scream out, but the hand prevented me. There were two men in the room. They were both masked."

"Can you describe them at all, madame?"

"One was very tall, and had a long black beard, the other was short and stout. His beard was reddish. They both wore hats pulled down over their eyes."

"H'm," said the magistrate thoughtfully, "too much beard, I fear."

"You mean they were false?"

"Yes, madame. But continue your story."

"It was the short man who was holding me. He forced a gag into my mouth, and then bound me with rope hand and foot. The other man was standing over my husband. He had caught up my little dagger paper-knife from the dressing-table and was holding it with the point just over his heart. When the short man had finished with me, he joined the other, and they forced my husband to get up and accompany them into the dressing-room next door. I was nearly fainting with terror, nevertheless I listened desperately.

"They were speaking in too low a tone for me to hear what they said. But I recognized the language, a bastard Spanish such as is spoken in some parts of South America. They seemed to be demanding something from my husband, and presently they grew angry, and their voices rose a little. I think the tall man was speaking. 'You know what we want!' he said. '*The secret!* Where is it?' I do not know what my husband answered, but the other replied fiercely: 'You lie! We know you have it. Where are your keys?'

"Then I heard sounds of drawers being pulled out. There is a safe on the wall of my husband's dressing room in which he always keeps a fairly large amount of ready money. Léonie tells me this has been rifled and the money taken, but evidently what they were looking for was not there, for presently I heard the tall man, with an oath, command my husband to dress himself. Soon after that, I think some noise in the house must have disturbed them, for they hustled my husband out into my room only half dressed."

"Pardon," interrupted Poirot, "but is there then no other egress from the dressing-room?"

"No, monsieur, there is only the communicating door into my room. They hurried my husband through, the short man in front, and the tall man behind him with the dagger still in his hand. Paul tried to break away to come to me. I saw his agonized eyes. He turned to his captors. 'I must speak to her,' he said. Then, coming to the side of the bed, 'It is all right, Eloise,' he said. 'Do not be afraid. I shall return before morning.' But, although he tried to make his voice confident, I could see the terror in his eyes. Then they hustled him out of the door, the tall man saying: 'One sound—and you are a dead man, remember.'

"After that," continued Mrs. Renauld, "I must have fainted. The next thing I recollect is Léonie rubbing my wrists, and giving me brandy."

"Madame Renauld," said the magistrate, "had you any idea what it was for which the assassins were searching?"

"None whatever, monsieur."

"Had you any knowledge that your husband feared something?"

"Yes. I had seen the change in him."

"How long ago was that?"

Mrs. Renauld reflected.

"Ten days perhaps."

"Not longer?"

"Possibly. I only noticed it then."

"Did you question your husband at all as to the cause?"

"Once. He put me off evasively. Nevertheless, I was convinced that he was suffering some terrible anxiety. However, since he evidently wished to conceal the fact from me, I tried to pretend that I had noticed nothing."

"Were you aware that he had called in the services of a detective?"

"A detective?" exclaimed Mrs. Renauld, very much surprised.

"Yes, this gentleman—M. Hercule Poirot." Poirot bowed. "He arrived today in response to a summons from your husband." And taking the letter written by M. Renauld from his pocket he handed it to the lady.

She read it with apparently genuine astonishment.

"I had no idea of this. Evidently he was fully cognizant of the danger."

"Now, madame, I will beg of you to be frank with me. Is there any incident in your husband's past life in South America which might throw light on his murder?"

Mrs. Renauld reflected deeply, but at last shook her head.

"I can think of none. Certainly my husband had many enemies, people he had got the better of in some way or another, but I can think of no one distinctive case. I do not say there is no such incident—only that I am not aware of it."

The examining magistrate stroked his beard disconsolately.

"And you can fix the time of this outrage?"

"Yes, I distinctly remember hearing the clock on the mantelpiece strike two." She nodded towards an eight-day travelling clock in a leather case which stood in the centre of the chimney-piece.

Poirot rose from his seat, scrutinized the clock carefully, and nodded, satisfied.

"And here too," exclaimed M. Bex, "is a wrist watch, knocked off the dressing-table by the assassins, without doubt, and smashed to atoms. Little did they know it would testify against them."

Gently he picked away the fragments of broken glass. Suddenly his face changed to one of utter stupefaction.

"Mon Dieu!" he ejaculated.

"What is it?"

"The hands of the watch point to seven o'clock!"

"What?" cried the examining magistrate, astonished.

But Poirot, deft as ever, took the broken trinket from the startled commissary, and held it to his ear. Then he smiled.

"The glass is broken, yes, but the watch itself is still going."

The explanation of the mystery was greeted with a relieved smile. But the magistrate bethought him of another point.

"But surely it is not seven o'clock now?"

"No," said Poirot gently, "it is a few minutes after five. Possibly the watch gains, is that so, madame?"

Mrs. Renauld was frowning perplexedly.

"It does gain," she admitted, "but I've never known it to gain quite so much as that."

With a gesture of impatience, the magistrate left the matter of the watch and proceeded with his interrogatory.

"Madame, the front door was found ajar. It seems almost certain that the murderers entered that way, yet it has not been forced at all. Can you suggest any explanation?"

"Possibly my husband went out for a stroll the last thing, and forgot to latch it when he came in."

"Is that a likely thing to happen?"

"Very. My husband was the most absent-minded of men."

There was a slight frown on her brow as she spoke, as though this trait in the dead man's character had at times vexed her.

"There is one inference I think we might draw," remarked the commissary suddenly. "Since the men insisted on M. Renauld dressing himself, it looks as though the place they were taking him to, the place where 'the secret' was concealed, lay some distance away."

The magistrate nodded.

"Yes, far, and yet not too far, since he spoke of being back by morning."

"What time does the last train leave the station of Merlinville?" asked Poirot.

"Eleven-fifty one way, and 12:17 the other, but it is more probable that they had a motor waiting."

"Of course," agreed Poirot, looking somewhat crestfallen.

"Indeed, that might be one way of tracing them," continued the magistrate, brightening. "A motor containing two foreigners is quite likely to have been noticed. That is an excellent point, M. Bex."

He smiled to himself, and then, becoming grave once more, he said to Mrs. Renauld:

"There is another question. Do you know any one of the name of 'Duveen'?"

"Duveen?" Mrs. Renauld repeated, thoughtfully. "No, for the moment, I cannot say I do."

"You have never heard your husband mention any one of that name?"

"Never."

"Do you know any one whose Christian name is Bella?"

He watched Mrs. Renauld narrowly as he spoke, seeking to surprise any signs of anger or consciousness, but she merely shook her head in quite a natural manner. He continued his questions.

"Are you aware that your husband had a visitor last night?"

Now he saw the red mount slightly in her cheeks, but she replied composedly:

"No, who was that?"

"A lady."

"Indeed?"

But for the moment the magistrate was content to say no more. It seemed unlikely that Madame Daubreuil had any connection with the crime, and he was anxious not to upset Mrs. Renauld more than necessary.

He made a sign to the commissary, and the latter replied with a nod. Then rising, he went across the room, and returned with the glass jar we had seen in the outhouse in his hand. From this, he took the dagger.

"Madame," he said gently, "do you recognize this?"

She gave a little cry.

"Yes, that is my little dagger." Then—she saw the stained point, and she drew back, her eyes widening with horror. "Is that—blood?"

"Yes, madame. Your husband was killed with this weapon." He removed it hastily from sight. "You are quite sure about it's being the one that was on your dressing-table last night?"

"Oh, yes. It was a present from my son. He was in the Air Force during the War. He gave his age as older than it was." There was a touch of the proud mother in her voice. "This was made from a streamline aeroplane wire, and was given to me by my son as a souvenir of the War."

"I see, madame. That brings us to another matter. Your son, where is he now? It is necessary that he should be telegraphed to without delay."

"Jack? He is on his way to Buenos Ayres."

"What?"

"Yes. My husband telegraphed to him yesterday. He had sent him on business to Paris, but yesterday he discovered that it would be necessary for him to proceed without delay to South America. There was a boat leaving Cherbourg for Buenos Ayres last night, and he wired him to catch it."

"Have you any knowledge of what the business in Buenos Ayres was?"

"No, monsieur, I know nothing of its nature, but Buenos Ayres is not my son's final destination. He was going overland from there to Santiago."

And, in unison, the magistrate and the commissary exclaimed:

"Santiago! Again Santiago!"

It was at this moment, when we were all stunned by the mention of that word, that Poirot approached Mrs. Renauld. He had been standing by the window like a man lost in a dream, and I doubt if he had fully taken in what had passed. He paused by the lady's side with a bow.

"*Pardon,* madame, but may I examine your wrists."

Though slightly surprised at the request, Mrs. Renauld held them out to him. Round each of them was a cruel red mark where the cords had bitten into the flesh. As he examined them, I fancied that a momentary flicker of excitement I had seen in his eyes disappeared.

"They must cause you great pain," he said, and once more he looked puzzled.

But the magistrate was speaking excitedly.

"Young M. Renauld must be communicated with at once by wireless. It is vital that we should know anything he can tell us about this trip to Santiago." He hesitated. "I hoped he might have been near at hand, so that we could have saved you pain, madame." He paused.

"You mean," she said in a low voice, "the identification of my husband's body?"

The magistrate bowed his head.

"I am a strong woman, monsieur. I can bear all that is required of me. I am ready—now."

"Oh, tomorrow will be quite soon enough, I assure you—"

"I prefer to get it over," she said in a low tone, a spasm of pain crossing her face. "If you will be so good as to give me your arm, doctor?"

The doctor hastened forward, a cloak was thrown over Mrs. Renauld's shoulders, and a slow procession went down the stairs. M. Bex hurried on ahead to open the door of the shed. In a minute or two Mrs. Renauld appeared in the doorway. She was very pale, but resolute. Behind her, M. Hautet was clacking commiserations and apologies like an animated hen.

She raised her hand to her face.

"A moment, messieurs, while I steel myself."

She took her hand away and looked down at the dead man. Then the marvellous self-control which had upheld her so far deserted her.

"Paul!" she cried. "Husband! Oh, God!" And pitching forward she fell unconscious to the ground.

Instantly Poirot was beside her, he raised the lid of her eye, felt her pulse. When he had satisfied himself that she had really fainted, he drew aside. He caught me by the arm.

"I am an imbecile, my friend! If ever there was love and grief in a woman's voice, I heard it then. My little idea was all wrong. *Eh bien!* I must start again!"

CHAPTER VI

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

BETWEEN THEM, the doctor and M. Hautet carried the unconscious woman into the house. The commissary looked after them, shaking his head.

"Pauvre femme," he murmured to himself. "The shock was too much for her. Well, well, we can do nothing. Now, M. Poirot, shall we visit the place where the crime was committed?"

"If you please, M. Bex."

We passed through the house, and out by the front door. Poirot had looked up at the staircase in passing, and shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

"It is to me incredible that the servants heard nothing. The creaking of that staircase, with *three* people descending it, would awaken the dead!"

"It was the middle of the night, remember. They were sound asleep by then."

But Poirot continued to shake his head as though not fully accepting the explanation. On the sweep of the drive, he paused, looking up at the house.

"What moved them in the first place to try if the front door were open? It was a most unlikely thing that it should be. It was far more probable that they should at once try to force a window."

"But all the windows on the ground floor are barred with iron shutters," objected the commissary.

Poirot pointed to a window on the first floor.

"That is the window of the bedroom we have just come from, is it not? And see—there is a tree by which it would be the easiest thing in the world to mount."

"Possibly," admitted the other. "But they could not have done so without leaving footprints in the flower-bed."

I saw the justice of his words. There were two large oval flower-beds planted with scarlet geraniums, one each side of the steps leading up to the front door. The tree in question had its roots actually at the back of the bed itself, and it would have been impossible to reach it without stepping on the bed.

"You see," continued the commissary, "owing to the dry weather no prints would show on the drive or paths; but, on the soft mould of the flower-bed, it would have been a very different affair."

Poirot went close to the bed and studied it attentively. As Bex had said, the mould was perfectly smooth. There was not an indentation on it anywhere.

Poirot nodded, as though convinced, and we turned away, but he suddenly darted off and began examining the other flower-bed.

"M. Bex!" he called. "See here. Here are plenty of traces for you."

The commissary joined him—and smiled.

"My dear M. Poirot, those are without doubt the footprints of the gardener's large hobnailed boots. In any case, it would have no importance, since this side we have no tree, and consequently no means of gaining access to the upper story."

"True," said Poirot, evidently crestfallen. "So you think these footprints are of no importance?"

"Not the least in the world."

Then, to my utter astonishment, Poirot pronounced these words:

"I do not agree with you. I have a little idea that these footprints are the most important things we have seen yet."

M. Bex said nothing, merely shrugged his shoulders. He was far too courteous to utter his real opinion.

"Shall we proceed?" he asked instead.

"Certainly. I can investigate this matter of the footprints later," said Poirot cheerfully.

Instead of following the drive down to the gate, M. Bex turned up a path that branched off at right angles. It led, up a slight incline, round to the right of the house, and was bordered on either side by a kind of shrubbery. Suddenly it emerged into a little clearing from which one obtained a view of the sea. A seat had been placed here, and not far from it was a rather ramshackle shed. A few steps further on, a neat line of small bushes marked the boundary of the Villa grounds. M. Bex pushed his way through these and we found ourselves on a wide stretch of open downs. I looked round, and saw something that filled me with astonishment.

"Why, this is a golf course," I cried.

Bex nodded.

"The limits are not completed yet," he explained. "It is hoped to be able to open them sometime next month. It was some of the men working on them who discovered the body early this morning."

I gave a gasp. A little to my left, where for the moment I had overlooked it, was a long narrow pit, and by it, face downwards, was the body of a man! For a moment, my heart gave a terrible leap, and I had a wild fancy that the tragedy had been duplicated. But the commissary dispelled my illusion by moving forward with a sharp exclamation of annoyance:

"What have my police been about? They had strict orders to allow no one near the place without proper credentials!"

The man on the ground turned his head over his shoulder.

"But I have proper credentials," he remarked, and rose slowly to his feet.

"My dear M. Giraud," cried the commissary. "I had no idea that you had arrived, even. The examining magistrate has been awaiting you with the utmost impatience."

As he spoke, I was scanning the new-comer with the keenest curiosity. The famous detective from the Paris Sûreté was familiar to me by name, and I was extremely interested to see him in the flesh. He was very tall, perhaps about thirty years of age, with auburn hair and moustache, and a military carriage. There was a trace of arrogance in his manner which showed that he was fully alive to his own importance. Bex introduced us, presenting Poirot as a colleague. A flicker of interest came into the detective's eye.

"I know you by name, M. Poirot," he said. "You cut quite a figure in the old days, didn't you? But methods are very different now."

"Crimes, though, are very much the same," remarked Poirot gently.

I saw at once that Giraud was prepared to be hostile. He resented the other being associated with him, and I felt that if he came across any clue of importance he would be more than likely to keep it to himself.

"The examining magistrate—" began Bex again. But Giraud interrupted him rudely:

"A fig for the examining magistrate! The light is the important thing. For all practical purposes it will be gone in another half-hour or so. I know all about the case, and the people at the house will do very well until tomorrow, but, if we're going to find a clue to the murderers, here is the spot we shall find it. Is it your police who have been trampling all over the place? I thought they knew better nowadays."

"Assuredly they do. The marks you complain of were made by the workmen who discovered the body."

The other grunted disgustedly.

"I can see the tracks where the three of them came through the hedge—but they were cunning. You can just recognize the centre footmarks as those of M. Renauld, but those on either side have been carefully obliterated. Not that there would really be much to see anyway on this hard ground, but they weren't taking any chances."

"The external sign," said Poirot. "That is what you seek, eh?"

The other detective stared.

"Of course."

A very faint smile came to Poirot's lips. He seemed about to speak, but checked himself. He bent down to where a spade was lying.

"That's what the grave was dug with, right enough," said Giraud. "But you'll get nothing from it. It was Renauld's own spade, and the man who used it wore gloves. Here they are." He gesticulated with his foot to where two soiled earth-stained gloves were lying. "And they're Renauld's too—or at least his gardener's. I tell you, the men who planned out this crime were taking no chances. The man was stabbed with his own dagger, and would have been buried with his own spade. They counted on leaving no traces! But I'll beat them. There's always *something!* And I mean to find it."

But Poirot was now apparently interested in something else, a short discoloured piece of lead-piping which lay beside the spade. He touched it delicately with his finger.

"And does this, too, belong to the murdered man?" he asked, and I thought I detected a subtle flavour of irony in the question.

Giraud shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he neither knew nor cared.

"May have been lying around here for weeks. Anyway, it doesn't interest me."

"I, on the contrary, find it very interesting," said Poirot sweetly.

I guessed that he was merely bent on annoying the Paris detective and, if so, he succeeded. The other turned away rudely, remarking that he had no time to waste, and bending down he resumed his minute search of the ground.

Meanwhile Poirot, as though struck by a sudden idea, stepped back over the boundary, and tried the door of the little shed.

"That's locked," said Giraud over his shoulder. "But it's only a place where the gardener keeps his rubbish. The spade didn't come from there, but from the tool-shed up by the house."

"Marvellous," murmured M. Bex, to me ecstatically. "He has been here but half an hour, and he already knows everything! What a man! Undoubtedly Giraud is the greatest detective alive today."

Although I disliked the detective heartily, I nevertheless was secretly impressed. Efficiency seemed to radiate from the man. I could not help feeling that, so far, Poirot had not greatly distinguished himself, and it vexed me. He seemed to be directing his attention to all sorts of silly, puerile points that had nothing to do with the case. Indeed, at this juncture, he suddenly asked:

"M. Bex, tell me, I pray you, the meaning of this whitewashed line that extends all round the grave. Is it a device of the police?"

"No, M. Poirot, it is an affair of the golf course. It shows that there is here to be a 'bunkair,' as you call it."

"A bunkair?" Poirot turned to me. "That is the irregular hole filled with sand and a bank at one side, is it not?"

I concurred.

"You do not play the golf, M. Poirot?" inquired Bex.

"I? Never! What a game!" He became excited. "Figure to yourself, each hole it is of a different length. The obstacles, they are not arranged mathematically. Even the greens are frequently up one side! There is only one pleasing thing—the how do you call them?—tee boxes! They, at least, are symmetrical."

I could not refrain from a laugh at the way the game appeared to Poirot, and my little friend smiled at me affectionately, bearing no malice. Then he asked:

"But M. Renauld, without doubt he played the golf?"

"Yes, he was a keen golfer. It's mainly owing to him, and to his large subscriptions, that this work is being carried forward. He even had a say in the designing of it."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Then he remarked:

"It was not a very good choice they made—of a spot to bury the body? When the men began to dig up the ground, all would have been discovered."

"Exactly," cried Giraud triumphantly. "And that *proves* that they were strangers to the place. It's an excellent piece of indirect evidence."

"Yes," said Poirot doubtfully. "No one who knew would bury a body there—unless—unless they *wanted* it to be discovered. And that is clearly absurd, is it not?"

Giraud did not even trouble to reply.

"Yes," said Poirot, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice. "Yes—undoubtedly—absurd!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERIOUS MADAME DAUBREUIL

As we retraced our steps to the house, M. Bex excused himself for leaving us, explaining that he must immediately acquaint the examining magistrate with the fact of Giraud's arrival. Giraud himself had been obviously delighted when Poirot declared that he had seen all he wanted. The last thing we observed, as we left the spot, was Giraud, crawling about on all fours, with a thoroughness in his search that I could not but admire. Poirot guessed my thoughts, for as soon as we were alone he remarked ironically:

"At last you have seen the detective you admire—the human foxhound! Is it not so, my friend?"

"At any rate, he's *doing* something," I said, with asperity. "If there's anything to find, he'll find it. Now you—"

"Eh bien! I also have found something! A piece of lead-piping."

"Nonsense, Poirot. You know very well that's got nothing to do with it. I meant *little* things—traces that may lead us infallibly to the murderers."

"Mon ami, a clue of two feet long is every bit as valuable as one measuring two millimetres! But it is the romantic idea that all important clues must be infinitesimal! As to the piece of lead-piping having nothing to do with the crime, you say that because Giraud told you so. No"—as I was about to interpose a question—"we will say no more. Leave Giraud to his search, and me to my ideas. The case seems straightforward enough—and yet—and yet, *mon ami,* I am not satisfied! And do you know why? Because of the wrist watch that is two hours fast. And then there are several curious little points that do not seem to fit in. For instance, if the object of the murderers was revenge, why did they not stab Renauld in his sleep and have done with it?"

"They wanted the 'secret,' " I reminded him.

Poirot brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve with a dissatisfied air.

"Well, where is this 'secret'? Presumably some distance away, since they wish him to dress himself. Yet he is found murdered close at hand, almost within ear-shot of the house. Then again, it is pure chance that a weapon such as the dagger should be lying about casually, ready to hand."

He paused frowning, and then went on:

"Why did the servants hear nothing? Were they drugged? Was there an accomplice and did that accomplice see to it that the front door should remain open? I wonder if—"

He stopped abruptly. We had reached the drive in front of the house. Suddenly he turned to me.

"My friend, I am about to surprise you—to please you! I have taken your reproaches to heart! We will examine some footprints!"

"Where?"

"In that right-hand bed yonder. M. Bex says that they are the footmarks of the gardener. Let us see if that is so. See, he approaches with his wheelbarrow."

Indeed an elderly man was just crossing the drive with a barrowful of seedlings. Poirot called to him, and he set down the barrow and came hobbling towards us.

"You are going to ask him for one of his boots to compare with the footmarks?" I asked breathlessly. My faith in Poirot revived a little. Since he said the footprints in this right-hand bed were important, presumably they *were.*

"Exactly," said Poirot.

"But won't he think it very odd?"

"He will not think about it at all."

We could say no more, for the old man had joined us.

"You want me for something, monsieur?"

"Yes. You have been gardener here a long time, haven't you?"

"Twenty-four years, monsieur."

"And your name is—?"

"Auguste, monsieur."

"I was admiring these magnificent geraniums. They are truly superb. They have been planted long?"

"Some time, monsieur. But of course, to keep the beds looking smart, one must keep bedding out a few new plants, and remove those that are over, besides keeping the old blooms well picked off."

"You put in some new plants yesterday, didn't you? Those in the middle there, and in the other bed also?"

"Monsieur has a sharp eye. It takes always a day or so for them to 'pick up.' Yes, I put ten new plants in each bed last night. As Monsieur doubtless knows, one should not put in plants when the sun is hot."

Auguste was charmed with Poirot's interest, and was quite inclined to be garrulous.

"That is a splendid specimen there," said Poirot, pointing. "Might I perhaps have a cutting of it?"

"But certainly, monsieur." The old fellow stepped into the bed, and carefully took a slip from the plant Poirot had admired.

Poirot was profuse in his thanks, and Auguste departed to his barrow.

"You see?" said Poirot with a smile, as he bent over the bed to examine the indentation of the gardener's hobnailed boot. "It is quite simple."

"I did not realize—"

"That the foot would be inside the boot? You do not use your excellent mental capacities sufficiently. Well, what of the footmark?"

I examined the bed carefully.

"All the footmarks in the bed were made by the same boot," I said at length after a careful study.

"You think so? *Eh bien,* I agree with you," said Poirot.

He seemed quite uninterested, and as though he were thinking of something else.

"At any rate," I remarked, "you will have one bee less in your bonnet now."

"Mon Dieu! But what an idiom! What does it mean?"

"What I meant was that now you will give up your interest in these footmarks."

But to my surprise Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, *mon ami.* At last I am on the right track. I am still in the dark, but, as I hinted just now to M. Bex, these footmarks are the most important and interesting things in the case! That poor Giraud—I should not be surprised if he took no notice of them whatever."

At that moment, the front door opened, and M. Hautet and the commissary came down the steps.

"Ah, M. Poirot, we were coming to look for you," said the magistrate. "It is getting late, but I wish to pay a visit to Madame Daubreuil. Without doubt she will be very much upset by M. Renauld's death, and we may be fortunate enough to get a clue from her. The secret that he did not confide to his wife, it is possible that he may have told it to the woman whose love held him enslaved. We know where our Samsons are weak, don't we?"

I admired the picturesqueness of M. Hautet's language. I suspected that the examining magistrate was by now thoroughly enjoying his part in the mysterious drama.

"Is M. Giraud not going to accompany us?" asked Poirot.

"M. Giraud has shown clearly that he prefers to conduct the case in his own way," said M. Hautet dryly.

One could see easily enough that Giraud's cavalier treatment of the examining magistrate had not prejudiced the latter in his favour. We said no more, but fell into line. Poirot walked with the examining magistrate, and the commissary and I followed a few paces behind.

"There is no doubt that Françoise's story is substantially correct," he remarked to me in a confidential tone. "I have been telephoning headquarters. It seems that three times in the last six weeks—that is to say since the arrival of M. Renauld at Merlinville—Madame Daubreuil has paid a large sum in notes into her banking account. Altogether the sum totals two hundred thousand francs!"

"Dear me," I said, considering, "that must be something like four thousand pounds!"

"Precisely. Yes, there can be no doubt that he was absolutely infatuated. But it remains to be seen whether he confided his secret to her. The examining magistrate is hopeful, but I hardly share his views."

During this conversation we were walking down the lane towards the fork in the road where our car had halted earlier in the afternoon, and in another moment I realized that the Villa Marguerite, the home of the mysterious Madame Daubreuil, was the small house from which the beautiful girl had emerged.

"She has lived here for many years," said the commissary, nodding his head towards the house. "Very quietly, very unobtrusively. She seems to have no friends or relations other than the acquaintances she has made in Merlinville. She never refers to the past, nor to her husband. One does not even know if he is alive or dead. There is a mystery about her, you comprehend."

I nodded, my interest growing.

"And—the daughter?" I ventured.

"A truly beautiful young girl—modest, devout, all that she should be. One pities her, for, though she may know nothing of the past, a man who wants to ask her hand in marriage must necessarily inform himself, and then—" The commissary shrugged his shoulders cynically.

"But it would not be her fault!" I cried, with rising indignation.

"No. But what will you? A man is particular about his wife's antecedents."

I was prevented from further argument by our arrival at the door. M. Hautet rang the bell. A few minutes elapsed, and then we heard a footfall within, and the door was opened. On the threshold stood my young goddess of that afternoon. When she saw us, the colour left her cheeks, leaving her deathly white, and her eyes widened with apprehension. There was no doubt about it, she was afraid!

"Mademoiselle Daubreuil," said M. Hautet, sweeping off his hat, "we regret infinitely to disturb you, but the exigencies of the Law—you comprehend? My compliments to Madame your mother, and will she have the goodness to grant me a few moments' interview."

For a moment the girl stood motionless. Her left hand was pressed to her side, as though to still the sudden unconquerable agitation of her heart. But she mastered herself, and said in a low voice:

"I will go and see. Please come inside."

She entered a room on the left of the hall, and we heard the low murmur of her voice. And then another voice, much the same in timbre, but with a slightly harder inflection behind its mellow roundness said: "But certainly. Ask them to enter."

In another minute we were face to face with the mysterious Madame Daubreuil.

She was not nearly so tall as her daughter, and the rounded curves of her figure had all the grace of full maturity. Her hair, again unlike her daughter's, was dark, and parted in the middle in the madonna style. Her eyes, half hidden by the drooping lids, were blue. There was a dimple in the round chin, and the half parted lips seemed always to hover on the verge of a mysterious smile. There was something almost exaggeratedly feminine about her, at once yielding and seductive. Though very well preserved, she was certainly no longer young, but her charm was of the quality which is independent of age.

Standing there, in her black dress with the fresh white collar and cuffs, her hands clasped together, she looked subtly appealing and helpless.

"You wished to see me, monsieur?" she asked.

"Yes, madame." M. Hautet cleared his throat. "I am investigating the death of M. Renauld. You have heard of it, no doubt?"

She bowed her head without speaking. Her expression did not change.

"We came to ask you whether you can—er—throw any light upon the circumstances surrounding it?"

"I?" The surprise of her tone was excellent.

"Yes, madame. It would, perhaps, be better if we could speak to you alone." He looked meaningly in the direction of the girl.

Madame Daubreuil turned to her.

"Marthe, dear—"

But the girl shook her head.

"No, *maman,* I will not go. I am not a child. I am twenty-two. I shall not go."

Madame Daubreuil turned back to the examining magistrate.

"You see, monsieur."

"I should prefer not to speak before Mademoiselle Daubreuil."

"As my daughter says, she is not a child."

For a moment the magistrate hesitated, baffled.

"Very well, madame," he said at last. "Have it your own way. We have reason to believe that you were in the habit of visiting the dead man at his Villa in the evenings. Is that so?"

The colour rose in the lady's pale cheeks, but she replied quietly:

"I deny your right to ask me such a question!"

"Madame, we are investigating a murder."

"Well, what of it? I had nothing to do with the murder."

"Madame, we do not say that for a moment. But you knew the dead man well. Did he ever confide in you as to any danger that threatened him?"

"Never."

"Did he ever mention his life in Santiago, and any enemies he may have made there?"

"No."

"Then you can give us no help at all?"

"I fear not. I really do not see why you should come to me. Cannot his wife tell you what you want to know?" Her voice held a slender inflection of irony.

"Madame Renauld has told us all she can."

"Ah!" said Madame Daubreuil. "I wonder—"

"You wonder what, madame?"

"Nothing."

The examining magistrate looked at her. He was aware that he was fighting a duel, and that he had no mean antagonist.

"You persist in your statement that M. Renauld confided nothing to you?"

"Why should you think it likely that he should confide in me?"

"Because, madame," said M. Hautet, with calculated brutality. "A man tells to his mistress what he does not always tell to his wife."

"Ah!" she sprang forward. Her eyes flashed fire. "Monsieur, you insult me! And before my daughter! I can tell you nothing. Have the goodness to leave my house!"

The honours undoubtedly rested with the lady. We left the Villa Marguerite like a shamefaced pack of schoolboys. The magistrate muttered angry ejaculations to himself. Poirot seemed lost in thought. Suddenly he came out of his reverie with a start, and inquired of M. Hautet if there was a good hotel near at hand.

"There is a small place, the Hotel des Bains, on this side of the town. A few hundred yards down the road. It will be handy for your investigations. We shall see you in the morning then, I presume?"

"Yes, I thank you, M. Hautet."

With mutual civilities, we parted company, Poirot and I going towards Merlinville, and the others returning to the Villa Geneviève.

"The French police system is very marvellous," said Poirot, looking after them. "The information they possess about every one's life, down to the most commonplace detail, is extraordinary. Though he has only been here a little over six weeks, they are perfectly well acquainted with M. Renauld's tastes and pursuits, and at a moment's notice they can produce information as to Madame Daubreuil's banking account, and the sums that have lately been paid in! Undoubtedly the *dossier* is a great institution. But what is that?" He turned sharply.

A figure was running hatless, down the road after us. It was Marthe Daubreuil.

"I beg your pardon," she cried breathlessly, as she reached us. "I—I should not do this, I know. You must not tell my mother. But is it true, what the people say, that M. Renauld called in a detective before he died, and—and that you are he?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," said Poirot gently. "It is quite true. But how did you learn it?"

"Françoise told our Amélie," explained Marthe, with a blush.

Poirot made a grimace.

"The secrecy, it is impossible in an affair of this kind! Not that it matters. Well, mademoiselle, what is it you want to know?"

The girl hesitated. She seemed longing, yet fearing, to speak. At last, almost in a whisper, she asked:

"Is—any one suspected?"

Poirot eyed her keenly.

Then he replied evasively:

"Suspicion is in the air at present, mademoiselle."

"Yes, I know—but—any one in particular?"

"Why do you want to know?"

The girl seemed frightened by the question. All at once Poirot's words about her earlier in the day recurred to me. The "girl with the anxious eyes!"

"M. Renauld was always very kind to me," she replied at last. "It is natural that I should be interested."

"I see," said Poirot. "Well, mademoiselle, suspicion at present is hovering round two persons."

"Two?"

I could have sworn there was a note of surprise and relief in her voice.

"Their names are unknown, but they are presumed to be Chilians from

Santiago. And now, mademoiselle, you see what comes of being young and beautiful! I have betrayed professional secrets for you!"

The girl laughed merrily, and then, rather shyly, she thanked him.

"I must run back now. *Maman* will miss me."

And she turned and ran back up the road, looking like a modern Atalanta. I stared after her.

"Mon ami," said Poirot, in his gentle ironical voice, "is it that we are to remain planted here all night—just because you have seen a beautiful young woman, and your head is in a whirl?"

I laughed and apologized.

"But she *is* beautiful, Poirot. Any one might be excused for being bowled over by her."

Poirot groaned.

"Mon Dieu! But it is that you have the susceptible heart!"

"Poirot," I said, "do you remember after the Styles Case when—"

"When you were in love with two charming women at once, and neither of them were for you? Yes, I remember."

"You consoled me by saying that perhaps some day we should hunt together again, and that then—"

"Eh bien?"

"Well, we are hunting together again, and—" I paused, and laughed rather self-consciously.

But to my surprise Poirot shook his head very earnestly.

"Ah, *mon ami,* do not set your heart on Marthe Daubreuil. She is not for you, that one! Take it from Papa Poirot!"

"Why," I cried, "the commissary assured me that she was as good as she is beautiful! A perfect angel!"

"Some of the greatest criminals I have known had the faces of angels," remarked Poirot cheerfully. "A malformation of the grey cells may coincide quite easily with the face of a madonna."

"Poirot," I cried, horrified, "you cannot mean that you suspect an innocent child like this!"

"Ta-ta-ta! Do not excite yourself! I have not said that I suspected her. But you must admit that her anxiety to know about the case is somewhat unusual."

"For once, I see further than you do," I said. "Her anxiety is not for herself—but for her mother."

"My friend," said Poirot, "as usual, you see nothing at all. Madame Daubreuil is very well able to look after herself without her daughter worrying about her. I admit I was teasing you just now, but all the same I repeat what I said before. Do not set your heart on that girl. She is not for you! I, Hercule Poirot, know it. *Sacré!* if only I could remember where I had seen that face!"

"What face?" I asked, surprised. "The daughter's?"

"No. The mother's."

Noting my surprise, he nodded emphatically.

"But yes—it is as I tell you. It was a long time ago, when I was still with the Police in Belgium. I have never actually seen the woman before, but I have seen her picture—and in connection with some case. I rather fancy—"

"Yes?"

"I may be mistaken, but I rather fancy that it was a murder case!"

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

WE WERE up at the Villa betimes next morning.

The man on guard at the gate did not bar our way this time. Instead, he respectfully saluted us, and we passed on to the house. The maid Léonie was just coming down the stairs, and seemed not averse to the prospect of a little conversation.

Poirot inquired after the health of Mrs. Renauld.

Léonie shook her head.

"She is terribly upset, *la pauvre dame!* She will eat nothing—but nothing! And she is as pale as a ghost. It is heartrending to see her. Ah, *par exemple,* it is not I who would grieve like that for a man who had deceived me with another woman!"

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

"What you say is very just, but what will you? The heart of a woman who loves will forgive many blows. Still, undoubtedly there must have been many scenes of recrimination between them in the last few months?"

Again Léonie shook her head.

"Never, monsieur. Never have I heard Madame utter a word of protest—of reproach, even! She had the temper and disposition of an angel—quite different to Monsieur."

"Monsieur Renauld had not the temper of an angel?"

"Far from it. When he enraged himself, the whole house knew of it. The day that he quarrelled with M. Jack—*ma foi!* they might have been heard in the market place, they shouted so loud!"

"Indeed," said Poirot. "And when did this quarrel take place?"

"Oh! it was just before M. Jack went to Paris. Almost he missed his train. He came out of the library, and caught up his bag which he had left in the hall. The automobile, it was being repaired, and he had to run for the station. I was dusting the salon, and I saw him pass, and his face was white—white—with two burning spots of red. Ah, but he was angry!"

Léonie was enjoying her narrative thoroughly.

"And the dispute, what was it about?"

"Ah, that I do not know," confessed Léonie. "It is true that they shouted, but their voices were so loud and high, and they spoke so fast, that only one well acquainted with English could have comprehended. But Monsieur, he was like a thundercloud all day! Impossible to please him!"

The sound of a door shutting upstairs cut short Léonie's loquacity.

"And Françoise who awaits me!" she exclaimed, awakening to a tardy remembrance of her duties. "That old one, she always scolds."

"One moment, mademoiselle. The examining magistrate, where is he?"

"They have gone out to look at the automobile in the garage. Monsieur the commissary had some idea that it might have been used on the night of the murder."

"Quelle idée," murmured Poirot, as the girl disappeared.

"You will go out and join them?"

"No, I shall await their return in the *salon.* It is cool there on this hot morning."

This placid way of taking things did not quite commend itself to me.

"If you don't mind—" I said, and hesitated.

"Not in the least. You wish to investigate on your own account, eh?"

"Well, I'd rather like to have a look at Giraud, if he's anywhere about, and see what he's up to."

"The human foxhound," murmured Poirot, as he leaned back in a comfortable chair, and closed his eyes. "By all means, my friend. Au revoir."

I strolled out of the front door. It was certainly hot. I turned up the path we had taken the day before. I had a mind to study the scene of the crime myself. I did not go directly to the spot, however, but turned aside into the bushes, so as to come out on the links some hundred yards or so further to the right. If Giraud were still on the spot, I wanted to observe his methods before he knew of my presence. But the shrubbery here was much denser, and I had quite a struggle to force my way through. When I emerged at last on the course, it was quite unexpectedly and with such vigour that I cannoned heavily into a young lady who had been standing with her back to the plantation.

She not unnaturally gave a suppressed shriek, but I, too, uttered an exclamation of surprise. For it was my friend of the train, Cinderella!

The surprise was mutual.

"You," we both exclaimed simultaneously.

The young lady recovered herself first.

"My only Aunt!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"For the matter of that, what are you?" I retorted.

"When last I saw you, the day before yesterday, you were trotting home to England like a good little boy. Have they given you a season ticket to and fro, on the strength of your M.P.?"

I ignored the end of the speech.

"When last I saw *you,"* I said, "you were trotting home with your sister, like a good little girl. By the way, how is your sister?"

A flash of white teeth rewarded me.

"How kind of you to ask! My sister is well, I thank you."

"She is here with you?"

"She remained in town," said the minx with dignity.

"I don't believe you've got a sister," I laughed. "If you have, her name is Harris!"

"Do you remember mine?" she asked, with a smile.

"Cinderella. But you're going to tell me the real one now, aren't you?"

She shook her head with a wicked look.

"Not even why you're here?"

"Oh, that! I suppose you've heard of members of my profession 'resting.' "

"At expensive French watering-places?"

"Dirt cheap if you know where to go."

I eyed her keenly.

"Still, you'd no intention of coming here when I met you two days ago?"

"We all have our disappointments," said Miss Cinderella sententiously. "There now, I've told you quite as much as is good for you. Little boys should not be inquisitive. You've not yet told me what *you're* doing here? Got the M.P. in tow, I suppose, doing the gay boy on the beach."

I shook my head. "Guess again. You remember my telling you that my great friend was a detective?"

"Yes?"

"And perhaps you've heard about this crime—at the Villa Geneviéve—?"

She stared at me. Her breast heaved, and her eyes grew wide and round.

"You don't mean—that you're in on *that?"*

I nodded. There was no doubt that I had scored heavily. Her emotion, as she regarded me, was only too evident. For some few seconds, she remained silent, staring at me. Then she nodded her head emphatically.

"Well, if that doesn't beat the band! Tote me round. I want to see all the horrors."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Bless the boy, didn't I tell you I doted on crimes? What do you think I'm imperilling my ankles for in high-heeled shoes over this stubble? I've been nosing round for hours. Tried the front way in, but that old stick-in-the-mud of a French gendarme wasn't taking any. I guess Helen of Troy, and Cleopatra, and Mary, Queen of Scots, rolled in one wouldn't cut ice with him! It's a real piece of luck happening on you this way. Come on, show me all the sights."

"But look here—wait a minute—I can't. Nobody's allowed in. They're awfully strict."

"Aren't you and your friend the big bugs?"

I was loath to relinquish my position of importance.

"Why are you so keen?" I asked weakly. "And what is it you want to see."

"Oh, everything! The place where it happened, and the weapon, and the body, and any finger-prints or interesting things like that. I've never had a chance of being right in on a murder like this before. It'll last me all my life."

I turned away, sickened. What were women coming to nowadays? The girl's ghoulish excitement nauseated me. I had read of the mobs of women who besieged the law courts when some wretched man was being tried for his life on the capital charge. I had sometimes wondered who these women were. Now I knew. They were of the likeness of Cinderella, young, yet obsessed with a yearning for morbid excitement, for sensation at any price, without regard to any decency or good feeling. The vividness of the girl's beauty had attracted me in spite of myself, yet at heart I retained my first impression of disapproval and dislike. I thought of my mother, long since dead. What would she have said of this strange modern product of girlhood? The pretty face with the paint and powder, and the ghoulish mind behind!

"Come off your high horse," said the lady suddenly. "And don't give yourself airs. When you got called to this job, did you put your nose in the air and say it was a nasty business, and you wouldn't be mixed up in it?"

"No, but—"

"If you'd been here on a holiday, wouldn't you be nosing round just the same as I am? Of course you would."

"I'm a man. You're a woman."

"Your idea of a woman is some one who gets on a chair and shrieks if she sees a mouse. That's all prehistoric. But you *will* show me round, won't you? You see, it might make a big difference to me."

"In what way?"

"They're keeping all the reporters out. I might make a big scoop with one of the papers. You don't know how much they pay for a bit of inside stuff."

I hesitated. She slipped a small soft hand into mine.

"*Please*—there's a dear."

I capitulated. Secretly, I knew that I should rather enjoy the part of showman. After all, the moral attitude displayed by the girl was none of my business. I was a little nervous as to what the examining magistrate might say, but I reassured myself by the reflection that no harm could possibly be done.

We repaired first to the spot where the body had been discovered. A man was on guard there, who saluted respectfully, knowing me by sight, and raised no question as to my companion. Presumably he regarded her as vouched for by me. I explained to Cinderella just how the discovery had been made, and she listened attentively, sometimes putting an intelligent question. Then we turned our steps in the direction of the Villa. I proceeded rather cautiously, for, truth to tell, I was not at all anxious to meet any one. I took the girl through the shrubbery round to the back of the house where the small shed was. I recollected that yesterday evening, after relocking the door, M. Bex had left the key with the *sergent de ville* Marchaud, "in case M. Giraud should require it while we are upstairs." I thought it quite likely that the Sûreté detective, after using it, had returned it to Marchaud again. Leaving the girl out of sight in the shrubbery, I entered the house. Marchaud was on duty outside the door of the *salon.* From within came the murmur of voices.

"Monsieur desires Hautet? He is within. He is again interrogating Françoise."

"No," I said hastily, "I don't want him. But I should very much like the key of the shed outside if it is not against regulations."

"But certainly, monsieur." He produced it. "Here it is. M. le juge gave orders that all facilities were to be placed at your disposal. You will return it to me when you have finished out there, that is all."

"Of course"

I felt a thrill of satisfaction as I realized that in Marchaud's eyes, at least, I ranked equally in importance with Poirot. The girl was waiting for me. She gave an exclamation of delight as she saw the key in my hand.

"You've got it then?"

"Of course," I said coolly. "All the same, you know, what I'm doing is highly irregular."

"You've been a perfect duck, and I shan't forget it. Come along. They can't see us from the house, can they?"

"Wait a minute." I arrested her eager advance. "I won't stop you if you really wish to go in. But do you? You've seen the grave, and the grounds, and you've heard all the details of the affair. Isn't that enough for you? This is going to be gruesome, you know, and—unpleasant."

She looked at me for a moment with an expression that I could not quite fathom. Then she laughed.

"Me for the horrors," she said. "Come along."

In silence we arrived at the door of the shed. I opened it and we passed in. I walked over to the body, and gently pulled down the sheet as M. Bex had done the preceding afternoon. A little gasping sound escaped from the girl's lips, and I turned and looked at her. There was horror on her face now, and those debonair high spirits of hers were quenched utterly. She had not chosen to listen to my advice, and she was punished now for her disregard of it. I felt singularly merciless towards her. She should go through with it, now. I turned the corpse gently over.

"You see," I said, "he was stabbed in the back."

Her voice was almost soundless.

"With what?"

I nodded towards the glass jar.

"That dagger."

Suddenly the girl reeled, and then sank down in a heap. I sprang to her assistance.

"You are faint. Come out of here. It has been too much for you."

"Water," she murmured. "Quick. Water. . . ."

I left her, and rushed into the house. Fortunately none of the servants were about, and I was able to secure a glass of water unobserved and add a few drops of brandy from a pocket flask. In a few minutes I was back again. The girl was lying as I had left her, but a few sips of the brandy and water revived her in a marvellous manner.

"Take me out of here—oh, quickly, quickly!" she cried, shuddering.

Supporting her with my arm I led her out into the air, and she pulled the door to behind her. Then she drew a deep breath.

"That's better. Oh, it was horrible! Why did you ever let me go in?"

I felt this to be so feminine that I could not forbear a smile. Secretly, I was not dissatisfied with her collapse. It proved that she was not quite so callous as I had thought her. After all she was little more than a child, and her curiosity had probably been of the unthinking order.

"I did my best to stop you, you know," I said gently.

"I suppose you did. Well, good-bye."

"Look here, you can't start off like that—all alone. You're not fit for it. I insist on accompanying you back to Merlinville."

"Nonsense. I'm quite all right now."

"Supposing you felt faint again? No, I shall come with you."

But this she combated with a good deal of energy. In the end, however, I prevailed so far as to be allowed to accompany her to the outskirts of the town. We retraced our steps over our former route, passing the grave again, and making a detour on to the road. Where the first straggling line of shops began, she stopped and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, and thank you ever so much for coming with me."

"Are you sure you're all right now?"

"Quite, thanks. I hope you won't get into any trouble over showing me things?"

I disclaimed the idea lightly.

"Well, good-bye."

"Au revoir," I corrected. "If you're staying here, we shall meet again."

She flashed a smile at me.

"That's so. Au revoir, then."

"Wait a second, you haven't told me your address?"

"Oh, I'm staying at the Hôtel du Phare. It's a little place, but quite good. Come and look me up tomorrow."

"I will," I said, with perhaps rather unnecessary *empressement.*

I watched her out of sight, then turned and retraced my steps to the Villa. I remembered that I had not relocked the door of the shed. Fortunately no one had noticed the oversight, and turning the key I removed it and returned it to the *sergent de ville.* And, as I did so, it came upon me suddenly that though Cinderella had given me her address I still did not know her name.

CHAPTER IX

M. GIRAUD FINDS SOME CLUES

IN THE *Salon* I found the examining magistrate busily interrogating, the old gardener Auguste. Poirot and the commissary, who were both present, greeted me respectively with a smile and a polite bow. I slipped quietly into a seat. M. Hautet was painstaking and meticulous in the extreme, but did not succeed in eliciting anything of importance.

The gardening gloves Auguste admitted to be his. He wore them when handling a certain species of primula plant which was poisonous to some people. He could not say when he had worn them last. Certainly he had not missed them. Where were they kept? Sometimes in one place, sometimes in another. The spade was usually to be found in the small tool shed. Was it locked? Of course it was locked. Where was the key kept? *Parbleu,* it was in the door of course! There was nothing of value to steal. Who would have expected a party of bandits, of assassins? Such things did not happen in Madame la Vicomtesse's time. M. Hautet signifying that he had finished with him, the old man withdrew, grumbling to the last. Remembering Poirot's unaccountable insistence on the footprints in the flower beds, I scrutinized him narrowly as he gave his evidence. Either he had nothing to do with the crime or he was a consummate actor. Suddenly, just as he was going out of the door, an idea struck me.

"Pardon, M. Hautet," I cried, "but will you permit me to ask him one question?"

"But certainly, monsieur."

Thus encouraged, I turned to Auguste.

"Where do you keep your boots?"

"Sac à papier!" growled the old man. "On my feet. Where else?"

"But when you go to bed at night?"

"Under my bed."

"But who cleans them?"

"Nobody. Why should they be cleaned? Is it that I promenade myself on the front like a young man? On Sunday I wear the Sunday boots, *bien entendu,* but otherwise—!" he shrugged his shoulders.

I shook my head, discouraged.

"Well, well," said the magistrate. "We do not advance very much. Undoubtedly we are held up until we get the return cable from Santiago. Has any one seen Giraud? In verity that one lacks politeness! I have a very good mind to send for him and—"

"You will not have to send far, M. le juge."

The quiet voice startled us. Giraud was standing outside looking in through the open window.

He leaped lightly into the room, and advanced to the table.

"Here I am, M. le juge, at your service. Accept my excuses for not presenting myself sooner."

"Not at all. Not at all," said the magistrate, rather confused.

"Of course I am only a detective," continued the other. "I know nothing of interrogatories. Were I conducting one, I should be inclined to do so without an open window. Any one standing outside can so easily hear all that passes. . . . But no matter."

M. Hautet flushed angrily. There was evidently going to be no love lost between the examining magistrate and the detective in charge of the case. They had fallen foul of each other at the start. Perhaps in any event it would have been much the same. To Giraud, all examining magistrates were fools, and to M. Hautet who took himself seriously, the casual manner of the Paris detective could not fail to give offence.

"Eh bien, M. Giraud," said the magistrate rather sharply. "Without doubt you have been employing your time to a marvel? You have the names of the assassins for us, have you not? And also the precise spot where they find themselves now?"

Unmoved by this irony, Giraud replied:

"I know at least where they have come from."

"Comment?"

Giraud took two small objects from his pocket and laid them down on the table. We crowded round. The objects were very simple ones: the stub of a cigarette, and an unlighted match. The detective wheeled round on Poirot.

"What do you see there?" he asked.

There was something almost brutal in his tone. It made my cheeks flush. But Poirot remained unmoved. He shrugged his shoulders.

"A cigarette end, and a match."

"And what does that tell you?"

Poirot spread out his hands.

"It tells me—nothing."

"Ah!" said Giraud, in a satisfied voice. "You haven't made a study of these things. That's not an ordinary match—not in this country at least. It's common enough in South America. Luckily it's unlighted. I mightn't have recognized it otherwise. Evidently one of the men threw away his cigarette end, and lit another, spilling one match out of the box as he did so."

"And the other match?" asked Poirot.

"Which match?"

"The one he *did* light his cigarette with. You have found that also?"

"No."

"Perhaps you didn't search very thoroughly."

"Not search thoroughly—" For a moment it seemed as though the detective were going to break out angrily, but with an effort he controlled himself. "I see you love a joke, M. Poirot. But in any case, match or no match, the cigarette end would be sufficient. It is a South American cigarette with liquorice pectoral paper."

Poirot bowed. The commissary spoke:

"The cigarette end and match might have belonged to M. Renauld. Remember, it is only two years since he returned from South America."

"No," replied the other confidently. "I have already searched among the effects of M. Renauld. The cigarettes he smoked and the matches he used are quite different."

"You do not think it odd," asked Poirot, "that these strangers should come unprovided with a weapon, with gloves, with a spade, and that they should so conveniently find all these things?"

Giraud smiled in a rather superior manner.

"Undoubtedly it is strange. Indeed, without the theory that I hold, it would be inexplicable."

"Aha!" said M. Hautet. "An accomplice. An accomplice within the house!"

"Or outside it," said Giraud with a peculiar smile.

"But some one must have admitted them? We cannot allow that, by an unparalleled piece of good fortune, they found the door ajar for them to walk in?"

"D' accord, M. le juge. The door was opened for them, but it could just as easily be opened from outside—by some one who possessed a key."

"But who did possess a key?"

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

"As for that, no one who possesses one is going to admit the fact if they can help it. But several people *might* have had one. M. Jack Renauld, the son, for instance. It is true that he is on his way to South America, but he might have lost the key or had it stolen from him. Then there is the gardener—he has been here many years. One of the younger servants may have a lover. It is easy to take an impression of a key and have one cut.

There are many possibilities. Then there is another person who, I should judge, is exceedingly likely to have such a thing in her keeping."

"Who is that?"

"Madame Daubreuil," said the detective dryly.

"Eh, eh!" said the magistrate, his face falling a little, "so you have heard about that, have you?"

"I hear everything," said Giraud imperturbably.

"There is one thing I could swear you have not heard," said M. Hautet, delighted to be able to show superior knowledge, and without more ado, he retailed the story of the mysterious visitor the night before. He also touched on the cheque made out to "Duveen," and finally handed Giraud the letter signed "Bella."

Giraud listened in silence, studied the letter attentively, and then handed it back.

"All very interesting, M. le juge. But my theory remains unaffected."

"And your theory is?"

"For the moment I prefer not to say. Remember, I am only just beginning my investigations."

"Tell me one thing, M. Giraud," said Poirot suddenly. "Your theory allows for the door being opened. It does not explain why it was *left* open. When they departed, would it not have been natural for them to close it behind them. If a *sergent de ville* had chanced to come up to the house, as is sometimes done to see that all is well, they might have been discovered and overtaken almost at once."

"Bah! They forgot it. A mistake, I grant you."

Then, to my surprise, Poirot uttered almost the same words as he had uttered to Bex the previous evening:

"I do not agree with you. The door being left open was the result of either design or necessity, and any theory that does not admit that fact is bound to prove vain."

We all regarded the little man with a good deal of astonishment. The confession of ignorance drawn from him over the match end had, I thought, been bound to humiliate him, but here he was self satisfied as ever, laying down the law to the great Giraud without a tremor.

The detective twisted his moustache, eyeing my friend in a somewhat bantering fashion.

"You don't agree with me, eh? Well, what strikes you particularly about the case. Let's hear your views."

"One thing presents itself to me as being significant. Tell me, M. Giraud, does nothing strike you as familiar about this case? Is there nothing it reminds you of?"

"Familiar? Reminds me of? I can't say off-hand. I don't think so, though."

"You are wrong," said Poirot quietly. "A crime almost precisely similar has been committed before."

"When? And where?"

"Ah, that, unfortunately, I cannot for the moment remember—but I shall do so. I had hoped *you* might be able to assist me."

Giraud snorted incredulously.

"There have been many affairs of masked men! I cannot remember the details of them all. These crimes all resemble each other more or less."

"There is such a thing as the individual touch." Poirot suddenly assumed his lecturing manner, and addressed us collectively. "I am speaking to you now of the psychology of crime. M. Giraud knows quite well that each criminal has his particular method, and that the police, when called in to investigate—say a case of burglary—can often make a shrewd guess at the offender, simply by the peculiar method he has employed. (Japp would tell you the same, Hastings.) Man is an unoriginal animal. Unoriginal within the law in his daily respectable life, equally unoriginal outside the law. If a man commits a crime, any other crime he commits will resemble it closely. The English murderer who disposed of his wives in succession by drowning them in their baths was a case in point. Had he varied his methods, he might have escaped detection to this day. But he obeyed the common dictates of human nature, arguing that what had once succeeded would succeed again, and he paid the penalty of his lack of originality."

"And the point of all this?" sneered Giraud.

"That when you have two crimes precisely similar in design and execution, you find the same brain behind them both. I am looking for that brain, M. Giraud—and I shall find it. Here we have a true clue—a psychological clue. You may know all about cigarettes and match ends, M. Giraud, but I, Hercule Poirot, know the mind of man!" And the ridiculous little fellow tapped his forehead with emphasis.

Giraud remained singularly unimpressed.

"For your guidance," continued Poirot, "I will also advise you of one fact which might fail to be brought to your notice. The wrist watch of Madame Renauld, on the day following the tragedy, had gained two hours. It might interest you to examine it."

Giraud stared.

"Perhaps it was in the habit of gaining?"

"As a matter of fact, I am told it did."

"*Eh bien,* then!"

"All the same, two hours is a good deal," said Poirot softly. "Then there is the matter of the footprints in the flower-bed."

He nodded his head towards the open window. Giraud took two eager strides, and looked out.

"This bed here?"

"Yes."

"But I see no footprints?"

"No," said Poirot, straightening a little pile of books on a table. "There are none."

For a moment an almost murderous rage obscured Giraud's face. He took two strides towards his tormentor, but at that moment the *salon* door was opened, and Marchaud announced.

"M. Stonor, the secretary, has just arrived from England. May he enter?"

CHAPTER X

GABRIEL STONOR

THE MAN who entered the room was a striking figure. Very tall, with a well knit athletic frame, and a deeply bronzed face and neck, he dominated the assembly. Even Giraud seemed anaemic beside him. When I knew him better I realized that Gabriel Stonor was quite an unusual personality. English by birth, he had knocked about all over the world. He had shot big game in Africa, travelled in Korea, ranched in California, and traded in the South Sea Islands. He had been secretary to a New York railway magnate, and had spent a year encamped in the desert with a friendly tribe of Arabs.

His unerring eye picked out M. Hautet.

"The examining magistrate in charge of the case? Pleased to meet you, M. le juge. This is a terrible business. How's Mrs. Renauld? Is she bearing up fairly well? It must have been an awful shock to her."

"Terrible, terrible," said M. Hautet. "Permit me to introduce M. Bex—our commissary of police, M. Giraud of the Sûreté. This gentleman is M. Hercule Poirot. M. Renauld sent for him, but he arrived too late to do anything to avert the tragedy. A friend of M. Poirot's, Captain Hastings."

Stonor looked at Poirot with some interest.

"Sent for you, did he?"

"You did not know, then, that M. Renauld contemplated calling in a detective?" interposed M. Bex.

"No, I didn't. But it doesn't surprise me a bit."

"Why?"

"Because the old man was rattled! I don't know what it was all about. He didn't confide in me. We weren't on those terms. But rattled he was—and badly!"

"H'm!" said M. Hautet. "But you have no notion of the cause?"

"That's what I said, sir."

"You will pardon me, M. Stonor, but we must begin with a few formalities. Your name?"

"Gabriel Stonor."

"How long ago was it that you became secretary to M. Renauld?"

"About two years ago, when he first arrived from South America. I met him through a mutual friend, and he offered me the post. A thundering good boss he was too."

"Did he talk to you much about his life in South America?"

"Yes, a good bit."

"Do you know if he was ever in Santiago?"

"Several times, I believe."

"He never mentioned any special incident that occurred there—anything that might have provoked some vendetta against him?"

"Never."

"Did he speak of any secret that he had acquired whilst sojourning there?"

"No."

"Did he ever say anything at all about a secret?"

"Not that I can remember. But, for all that, there *was* a mystery about him. I've never heard him speak of his boyhood for instance, or of any incident prior to his arrival in South America. He was a French Canadian by birth, I believe, but I've never heard him speak of his life in Canada. He could shut up like a clam if he liked."

"So, as far as you know, he had no enemies, and you can give us no clue as to any secret to obtain possession of which he might have been murdered?"

"That's so."

"M. Stonor, have you ever heard the name of Duveen in connection with M. Renauld?"

"Duveen. Duveen." He tried the name over thoughtfully. "I don't think I have. And yet it seems familiar."

"Do you know a lady, a friend of M. Renauld's whose Christian name is Bella?"

Again Mr. Stonor shook his head.

"Bella Duveen? Is that the full name? It's curious! I'm sure I know it. But for the moment I can't remember in what connection."

The magistrate coughed.

"You understand, M. Stonor—the case is like this. *There must be no reservations.* You might, perhaps, through a feeling of consideration for Madame Renauld—for whom, I gather, you have a great esteem and affection, you might—*enfin!*" said M. Hautet getting rather tied up in his sentence, "there must absolutely be no reservations."

Stonor stared at him, a dawning light of comprehension in his eyes.

"I don't quite get you," he said gently. "Where does Mrs. Renauld come in? I've an immense respect and affection for that lady; she's a very wonderful and unusual type, but I don't quite see how my reservations, or otherwise, could affect her?"

"Not if this Bella Duveen should prove to have been something more than a friend to her husband?"

"Ah!" said Stonor. "I get you now. But I'll bet my bottom dollar that you're wrong. The old man never so much as looked at a petticoat. He just adored his own wife. They were the most devoted couple I know."

M. Hautet shook his head gently.

"M. Stonor, we hold absolute proof—a love letter written by this Bella to M. Renauld, accusing him of having tired of her. Moreover, we have further proof that, at the time of his death, he was carrying on an intrigue with a Frenchwoman, a Madame Daubreuil, who rents the adjoining Villa. And this is the man who, according to you, never looked at a petticoat!"

The secretary's eyes narrowed.

"Hold on, M. le juge. You're barking up the wrong tree. I knew Paul Renauld. What you've just been saying is utterly impossible. There's some other explanation."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

"What other explanation could there be?"

"What leads you to think it was a love affair?"

"Madame Daubreuil was in the habit of visiting him here in the evenings. Also, since M. Renauld came to the Villa Geneviève, Madame Daubreuil has paid large sums of money into the bank in notes. In all, the amount totals four thousand pounds of your English money."

"I guess that's right," said Stonor quietly. "I transmitted him those sums at his request. But it wasn't an intrigue."

"Eh! *mon Dieu!* What else could it be?"

"Blackmail," said Stonor sharply, bringing down his hand with a slam on the table. "That's what it was."

"Ah! voilà une idé!" cried the magistrate, shaken in spite of himself.

"Blackmail," repeated Stonor. "The old man was being bled—and at a good rate too. Four thousand in a couple of months. Whew! I told you just now there was a mystery about Renauld. Evidently this Madame Daubreuil knew enough of it to put the screws on."

"It is possible," the commissary cried excitedly. "Decidedly, it is possible."

"Possible?" roared Stonor. "It's certain! Tell me, have you asked Mrs. Renauld about this love affair stunt of yours?"

"No, monsieur. We did not wish to occasion her any distress if it could reasonably be avoided."

"Distress? Why, she'd laugh in your face. I tell you, she and Renauld were a couple in a hundred."

"Ah, that reminds me of another point," said M. Hautet. "Did M. Renauld take you into his confidence at all as to the dispositions of his will?"

"I know all about it—took it to the lawyer for him after he'd drawn it out. I can give you the name of his solicitors if you want to see it. They've got it there. Quite simple. Half in trust to his wife for her lifetime, the other half to his son. A few legacies. I rather think he left me a thousand."

"When was this will drawn up?"

"Oh, about a year and a half ago."

"Would it surprise you very much, M. Stonor, to hear that M. Renauld had made another will, less than a fortnight ago?"

Stonor was obviously very much surprised.

"I'd no idea of it. What's it like?"

"The whole of his vast fortune is left unreservedly to his wife. There is no mention of his son."

Mr. Stonor gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

"I call that rather rough on the lad. His mother adores him, of course, but to the world at large it looks rather like a want of confidence on his father's part. It will be rather galling to his pride. Still, it all goes to prove what I told you, that Renauld and his wife were on first rate terms."

"Quite so, quite so," said M. Hautet. "It is possible we shall have to revise our ideas on several points. We have, of course, cabled to Santiago, and are expecting a reply from there any minute. In all possibility, everything will then be perfectly clear and straightforward. On the other hand, if your suggestion of blackmail is true, Madame Daubreuil ought to be able to give us valuable information."

Poirot interjected a remark:

"M. Stonor, the English chauffeur, Masters, had he been long with M. Renauld?"

"Over a year?"

"Have you any idea whether he has ever been in South America?"

"I'm quite sure he hasn't. Before coming to Mr. Renauld, he had been for many years with some people in Gloucestershire whom I know well."

"In fact, you can answer for him as being above suspicion?"

"Absolutely."

Poirot seemed somewhat crest-fallen.

Meanwhile the magistrate had summoned Marchaud.

"My compliments to Madame Renauld, and I should be glad to speak to her for a few minutes. Beg her not to disturb herself. I will wait upon her upstairs."

Marchaud saluted and disappeared.

We waited some minutes, and then, to our surprise, the door opened, and Mrs. Renauld, deathly pale in her heavy mourning, entered the room.

M. Hautet brought forward a chair, uttering vigorous protestations, and she thanked him with a smile. Stonor was holding one hand of hers in his with an eloquent sympathy. Words evidently failed him. Mrs. Renauld turned to M. Hautet.

"You wished to ask me something, M. le juge."

"With your permission, madame. I understand your husband was a French Canadian by birth. Can you tell me anything of his youth, or upbringing?"

She shook her head.

"My husband was always very reticent about himself, monsieur. He came from the North West, I know, but I fancy that he had an unhappy childhood, for he never cared to speak of that time. Our life was lived entirely in the present and the future."

"Was there any mystery in his past life?"

Mrs. Renauld smiled a little, and shook her head.

"Nothing so romantic, I am sure, M. le juge."

M. Hautet also smiled.

"True, we must not permit ourselves to get melodramatic. There is one thing more—" he hesitated.

Stonor broke in impetuously:

"They've got an extraordinary idea into their heads Mrs. Renauld. They actually fancy that Mr. Renauld was carrying on an intrigue with a Madame Daubreuil who, it seems, lives next door."

The scarlet colour flamed into Mrs. Renauld's cheeks. She flung her head up, then bit her lip, her face quivering. Stonor stood looking at her in astonishment, but M. Bex leaned forward and said gently: "We regret to cause you pain, madame, but have you any reason to believe that Madame Daubreuil was your husband's mistress?"

With a sob of anguish, Mrs. Renauld buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved convulsively. At last she lifted her head, and said brokenly:

"She may have been."

Never, in all my life, have I seen anything to equal the blank amazement on Stonor's face. He was thoroughly taken aback.

CHAPTER XI

JACK RENAULD

WHAT THE next development of the conversation would have been, I cannot say, for at that moment the door was thrown violently open, and a tall young man strode into the room.

Just for a moment I had the uncanny sensation that the dead man had come to life again. Then I realized that this dark head was untouched with grey, and that, in point of fact, it was a mere boy who now burst in among us with so little ceremony. He went straight to Mrs. Renauld with an impetuosity that took no heed of the presence of others.

"Mother!"

"Jack!" With a cry she folded him in her arms. "My dearest! But what brings you here? You were to sail on the *Anzora* from Cherbourg two days ago?" Then, suddenly recalling to herself the presence of others, she turned with a certain dignity. "My son, messieurs."

"Aha!" said M. Hautet, acknowledging the young man's bow. "So you did not sail on the *Anzora?*"

"No, monsieur. As I was about to explain, the *Anzora* was detained twenty-four hours through engine trouble. I should have sailed last night instead of the night before, but, happening to buy an evening paper, I saw in it an account of the—the awful tragedy that had befallen us—" His voice broke, and the tears came into his eyes. "My poor father—my poor, poor, father."

Staring at him like one in a dream, Mrs. Renauld repeated: "So you did not sail?" And then, with a gesture of infinite weariness, she murmured as though to herself, "After all, it does not matter—now."

"Sit down, M. Renauld, I beg of you," said M. Hautet, indicating a chair. "My sympathy for you is profound. It must have been a terrible shock to you to learn the news as you did. However, it is most fortunate that you were prevented from sailing. I am in hopes that you may be able to give us just the information we need to clear up this mystery."

"I am at your disposal, M. le juge. Ask me any questions you please."

"To begin with, I understand that this journey was being undertaken at your father's request?"

"Quite so, M. le juge. I received a telegram bidding me to proceed without delay to Buenos Ayres, and from thence via the Andes to Valparaiso and on to Santiago."

"Ah. And the object of this journey?"

"I have no idea, M. le juge."

"What?"

"No. See, here is the telegram."

The magistrate took it and read it aloud.

" 'Proceed immediately Cherbourg embark *Anzora* sailing tonight Buenos Ayres. Ultimate destination Santiago. Further instructions will await you Buenos Ayres. Do not fail. Matter is of utmost importance. Renauld.' And there had been no previous correspondence on the matter?"

Jack Renauld shook his head.

"That is the only intimation of any kind. I knew, of course, that my father, having lived so long out there, had necessarily many interests in South America. But he had never mooted any suggestion of sending me out."

"You have, of course, been a good deal in South America, M. Renauld?"

"I was there as a child. But I was educated in England, and spent most of my holidays in that country, so I really know far less of South America than might be supposed. You see, the war broke out when I was seventeen."

"You served in the English Flying Corps, did you not?"

"Yes. M. le juge."

M. Hautet nodded his head, and proceeded with his inquiries along the, by now, well-known lines. In response, Jack Renauld declared definitely that he knew nothing of any enmity his father might have incurred in the city of Santiago, or elsewhere in the South American continent, that he had noticed no change in his father's manner of late, and that he had never heard him refer to a secret. He had regarded the mission to South America as connected with business interests.

As M. Hautet paused for a minute, the quiet voice of Giraud broke in.

"I should like to put a few questions on my own account, M. le juge."

"By all means, M. Giraud, if you wish," said the magistrate coldly.

Giraud edged his chair a little nearer to the table.

"Were you on good terms with your father, M. Renauld?"

"Certainly I was," returned the lad haughtily.

"You assert that positively?"

"Yes."

"No little disputes, eh?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Every one may have a difference of opinion now and then."

"Quite so, quite so. But if any one were to assert that you had a violent quarrel with your father on the eve of your departure for Paris, that person, without doubt, would be lying?"

I could not but admire the ingenuity of Giraud. His boast "I know everything" had been no idle one. Jack Renauld was clearly disconcerted by the question.

"We—we did have an argument," he admitted.

"Ah, an argument! In the course of that argument did you use this phrase: 'When you are dead, I can do as I please?' "

"I may have done," muttered the other. "I don't know."

"In response to that, did your father say: 'But I am not dead yet!' To which you responded: 'I wish you were!' "

The boy made no answer. His hands fiddled nervously with the things on the table in front of him.

"I must request an answer, please, M. Renauld," said Giraud sharply.

With an angry exclamation, the boy swept a heavy paper-knife on to the floor.

"What does it matter? You might as well know. Yes, I did quarrel with my father. I dare say I said all those things—I was so angry I cannot even remember what I said! I was furious—I could almost have killed him at that moment—there, make the most of that!" He leant back in his chair, flushed and defiant.

Giraud smiled, then, moving his chair back a little, said:

"That is all. You would, without doubt, prefer to continue the interrogatory, M. le juge."

"Ah, yes, exactly," said M. Hautet. "And what was the subject of your quarrel?"

"I decline to state."

M. Hautet sat up in his chair.

"M. Renauld, it is not permitted to trifle with the law!" he thundered. "What was the subject of the quarrel?"

Young Renauld remained silent, his boyish face sullen and overcast. But another voice spoke, imperturbable and calm, the voice of Hercule Poirot.

"I will inform you, if you like, M. le juge."

"You know?"

"Certainly I know. The subject of the quarrel was Mademoiselle Marthe Daubreuil."

Renauld sprang round, startled. The magistrate leaned forward.

"Is this so, monsieur."

Jack Renauld bowed his head.

"Yes," he admitted. "I love Mademoiselle Daubreuil, and I wish to marry her. When I informed my father of the fact, he flew at once into a violent rage. Naturally, I could not stand hearing the girl I loved insulted, and I, too, lost my temper."

M. Hautet looked across at Mrs. Renauld.

"You were aware of this—attachment, madame."

"I feared it," she replied simply.

"Mother," cried the boy. "You too! Marthe is as good as she is beautiful. What can you have against her?"

"I have nothing against Mademoiselle Daubreuil in any way. But I should prefer you to marry an Englishwoman, or if a Frenchwoman not one who has a mother of doubtful antecedents!"

Her rancour against the older woman showed plainly in her voice, and I could well understand that it must have been a bitter blow to her when her only son showed signs of falling in love with the daughter of her rival.

Mrs. Renauld continued, addressing the magistrate:

"I ought, perhaps, to have spoken to my husband on the subject, but I hoped that it was only a boy and girl flirtation which would blow over all the quicker if no notice was taken of it. I blame myself now for my silence, but my husband, as I told you, had seemed so anxious and care-worn, different altogether from his normal self, that I was chiefly concerned not to give him any additional worry."

M. Hautet nodded.

"When you informed your father of your intentions towards Mademoiselle Daubreuil," he resumed, "he was surprised?"

"He seemed completely taken aback. Then he ordered me peremptorily to dismiss any such idea from my mind. He would never give his consent to such a marriage. Nettled, I demanded what he had against Mademoiselle Daubreuil. To that he could give no satisfactory reply, but spoke in slighting terms of the mystery surrounding the lives of the mother and daughter. I answered that I was marrying Marthe, and not her antecedents, but he shouted me down with a peremptory refusal to discuss the matter in any way. The whole thing must be given up. The injustice and high-handedness of it all maddened me—especially since he himself always seemed to go out of his way to be attentive to the Daubreuils and was always suggesting that they should be asked to the house. I lost my head, and we quarrelled in earnest. My father reminded me that I was entirely dependent on him, and it must have been in answer to that that I made the remark about doing as I pleased after his death—"

Poirot interrupted with a quick question.

"You were aware, then, of the terms of your father's will?"

"I knew that he had left half his fortune to me, the other half in trust for my mother to come to me at her death," replied the lad.

"Proceed with your story," said the magistrate.

"After that we shouted at each other in sheer rage, until I suddenly realized that I was in danger of missing my train to Paris. I had to run for the station, still in a white heat of fury. However, once well away, I calmed down. I wrote to Marthe, telling her what had happened, and her reply soothed me still further. She pointed out to me that we had only to be steadfast, and any opposition was bound to give way at last. Our affection for each other must be tried and proved, and when my parents realized that it was no light infatuation on my part they would doubtless relent towards us. Of course, to her, I had not dwelt on my father's principal objection to the match. I soon saw that I should do my cause no good by violence. My father wrote me several letters to Paris, affectionate in tone, and which did not refer to our disagreement or its cause, and I replied in the same strain."

"You can produce those letters, eh?" said Giraud.

"I did not keep them."

"No matter," said the detective.

Renauld looked at him for a moment, but the magistrate was continuing his questions.

"To pass to another matter, are you acquainted with the name of Duveen, M. Renauld?"

"Duveen?" said Jack. "Duveen?" He leant forward, and slowly picked up the paper-knife he had swept from the table. As he lifted his head, his eyes met the watching ones of Giraud. "Duveen? No, I can't say I am."

"Will you read this letter, M. Renauld? And tell me if you have any idea as to who the person was who addressed it to your father?"

Jack Renauld took the letter, and read it through, the colour mounting in his face as he did so.

"Addressed to my father?" The emotion and indignation in his tones were evident.

"Yes. We found it in the pocket of his coat."

"Does—" He hesitated, throwing the merest fraction of a glance towards his mother. The magistrate understood.

"As yet—no. Can you give us any clue as to the writer?"

"I have no idea whatsoever."

M. Hautet sighed.

"A most mysterious case. Ah, well, I suppose we can now rule out the letter altogether. What do you think, M. Giraud? It does not seem to lead us anywhere."

"It certainly does not," agreed the detective with emphasis.

"And yet," sighed the magistrate, "it promised at the beginning to be such a beautiful and simple case!" He caught Mrs. Renauld's eye, and blushed in immediate confusion. "Ah, yes," he coughed, turning over the papers on the table. "Let me see, where were we? Oh, the weapon. I fear this may give you pain, M. Renauld. I understand it was a present from you to your mother. Very said—very distressing—"

Jack Renauld leaned forward. His face, which had flushed during the perusal of the letter, was now deadly white.

"Do you mean—that it was with an aeroplane wire paper cutter that my father was—was killed? But it's impossible! A little thing like that!"

"Alas, M. Renauld, it is only too true! An ideal little tool, I fear. Sharp and easy to handle."

"Where is it? Can I see it? Is it still in the—the body?"

"Oh, no, it had been removed. You would like to see it? To make sure? It would be as well, perhaps, though madame has already identified it. Still—M. Bex, might I trouble you?"

"Certainly, M. le juge. I will fetch it immediately."

"Would it not be better to take M. Renauld to the shed?" suggested Giraud smoothly. "Without doubt he would wish to see his father's body."

The boy made a shivering gesture of negation, and the magistrate, always disposed to cross Giraud whenever possible, replied.

"But no—not at present. M. Bex will be so kind as to bring it to us here."

The commissary left the room. Stonor crossed to Jack, and wrung him by the hand. Poirot had risen and was adjusting a pair of candlesticks that struck his trained eye as being a shade askew. The magistrate was reading the mysterious love-letter through a last time, clinging desperately to his first theory of jealousy and a stab in the back.

Suddenly the door burst open and the commissary rushed in.

"M. le juge! M. le juge!"

"But yes. What is it?"

"The dagger! It is gone!"

"Comment—gone?"

"Vanished. Disappeared. The glass jar that contained it is empty!"

"What?" I cried. "Impossible. Why, only this morning I saw—" The words died on my tongue.

But the attention of the entire room was diverted to me.

"What is that you say?" cried the commissary. "This morning?"

"I saw it there this morning," I said slowly. "About an hour and a half ago, to be accurate."

"You went to the shed, then? How did you get the key?"

"I asked the *sergent de ville* for it."

"And you went there? Why?"

I hesitated, but in the end I decided that the only thing to do was to make a clean breast of it.

"M. le juge," I said. "I have committed a grave fault, for which I must crave your indulgence."

"Eh bien! Proceed, monsieur."

"The fact of the matter is," I said, wishing myself anywhere else than where I was, "that I met a young lady, an acquaintance of mine. She displayed a great desire to see everything that was to be seen, and I—well, in short, I took the key to show her the body."

"Ah, *par exemple,"* cried the magistrate indignantly. "But it is a grave fault you have committed there, Captain Hastings. It is altogether most irregular. You should not have permitted yourself this folly."

"I know," I said meekly. "Nothing that you can say could be too severe, M. le juge."

"You did not invite this lady to come here?"

"Certainly not. I met her quite by accident. She is an English lady who happens to be staying in Merlinville, though I was not aware of that until my unexpected meeting with her."

"Well, well," said the magistrate, softening. "It was most irregular, but the lady is without doubt young and beautiful, *n'est-ce pas?* What it is to be young! *O jeunesse, jeunesse!"* And he sighed sentimentally.

But the commissary, less romantic, and more practical, took up the tale:

"But did not you reclose and lock the door when you departed."

"That's just it," I said slowly. "That's what I blame myself for so terribly. My friend was upset at the sight. She nearly fainted. I got her some brandy and water, and afterwards insisted on accompanying her back to town. In the excitement, I forgot to relock the door. I only did so when I got back to the Villa."

"Then for twenty minutes at least—" said the commissary slowly. He stopped.

"Exactly," I said.

"Twenty minutes," mused the commissary.

"It is deplorable," said M. Hautet, his sternness of manner returning. "Without precedent."

Suddenly another voice spoke.

"You find it deplorable, M. le juge?" asked Giraud.

"Certainly I do."

"Eh bien! I find it admirable," said the other imperturbably.

This unexpected ally quite bewildered me.

"Admirable, M. Giraud?" asked the magistrate, studying him cautiously out of the corner of his eye.

"Precisely."

"And why?"

"Because we know now that the assassin, or an accomplice of the assassin, has been near the Villa only an hour ago. It will be strange if, with that knowledge, we do not shortly lay hands upon him." There was a note of menace in his voice. He continued: "He risked a good deal to gain possession of that dagger. Perhaps he feared that finger-prints might be discovered on it."

Poirot turned to Bex.

"You said there were none?"

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps he could not be sure."

Poirot looked at him.

"You are wrong, M. Giraud. The assassin wore gloves. So he must have been sure."

"I do not say it was the assassin himself. It may have been an accomplice who was not aware of that fact."

"Ils sont mal renseignés, les accomplices!" muttered Poirot, but he said no more.

The magistrate's clerk was gathering up the papers on the table. M. Hautet addressed us:

"Our work here is finished. Perhaps, M. Renauld, you will listen whilst your evidence is read over to you. I have purposely kept all the proceedings as informal as possible. I have been called original in my methods, but I maintain that there is much to be said for originality. The case is now in the clever hands of the renowned M. Giraud. He will without doubt distinguish himself. Indeed, I wonder that he has not already laid his hands upon the murderers! Madame, again let me assure you of my heart-felt sympathy. Messieurs, I wish you all good day." And, accompanied by his clerk and the commissary, he took his departure.

Poirot tugged out that large turnip of a watch of his, and observed the time.

"Let us return to the hotel for lunch, my friend," he said. "And you shall recount to me in full the indiscretions of this morning. No one is observing us. We need make no adieux."

We went quietly out of the room. The examining magistrate had just driven off in his car. I was going down the steps when Poirot's voice arrested me:

"One little moment, my friend." Dexterously, he whipped out his yard measure, and proceeded, quite solemnly, to measure an overcoat hanging in the hall from the collar to the hem. I had not seen it hanging there before, and guessed that it belonged to either Mr. Stonor, or Jack Renauld.

Then, with a little satisfied grunt, Poirot returned the measure to his pocket, and followed me out into the open air.

CHAPTER XII

POIROT ELUCIDATES CERTAIN POINTS

"WHY DID you measure that overcoat?" I asked, with some curiosity, as we walked down the hot white road at a leisurely pace.

"Parbleu! to see how long it was," replied my friend imperturbably.

I was vexed. Poirot's incurable habit of making a mystery out of nothing never failed to irritate me. I relapsed into silence, and followed a train of thought of my own. Although I had not noticed them specially at the time, certain words Mrs. Renauld had addressed to her son now recurred to me, fraught with a new significance. "So you did not sail?" she had said, and then had added: *"After all, it does not matter—now."*

What had she meant by that? The words were enigmatical—significant. Was it possible that she knew more than we supposed? She had denied all knowledge of the mysterious mission with which her husband was to have entrusted his son. But was she really less ignorant than she pretended? Could she enlighten us if she chose, and was her silence part of a carefully thought out and preconceived plan?

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that I was right. Mrs. Renauld knew more than she chose to tell. In her surprise at seeing her son, she had momentarily betrayed herself. I felt convinced that she knew, if not the assassins, at least the motive for the assassination. But some very powerful considerations must keep her silent.

"You think profoundly, my friend," remarked Poirot, breaking in upon my reflections. "What is it that intrigues you so?"

I told him, sure of my ground, though feeling expectant that he would ridicule my suspicions. But to my surprise he nodded thoughtfully.

"You are quite right, Hastings. From the beginning I have been sure that she was keeping something back. At first I suspected her, if not of inspiring, at least of conniving at the crime."

"You suspected *her?"* I cried.

"But certainly! She benefits enormously—in fact, by this new will, she is the only person to benefit. So, from the start, she was singled out for attention. You may have noticed that I took an early opportunity of examining her wrists. I wished to see whether there was any possibility that she had gagged and bound herself. *Eh bien,* I saw at once that there was no fake, the cords had actually been drawn so tight as to cut into the flesh.

That ruled out the possibility of her having committed the crime single-handed. But it was still possible for her to have connived at it, or to have been the instigator with an accomplice. Moreover, the story, as she told it, was singularly familiar to me—the masked men that she could not recognize, the mention of 'the secret'—I had heard, or read, all these things before. Another little detail confirmed my belief that she was not speaking the truth. *The wrist watch, Hastings, the wrist watch!*"

Again that wrist watch! Poirot was eyeing me curiously.

"You see, *mon ami?* You comprehend?"

"No," I replied with some ill humour. "I neither see nor comprehend. You make all these confounded mysteries, and it's useless asking you to explain. You always like keeping everything up your sleeve to the last minute."

"Do not enrage yourself, my friend," said Poirot with a smile. "I will explain if you wish. But not a word to Giraud, *c'est entendu?* He treats me as an old one of no importance! *We shall see!* In common fairness I gave him a hint. If he does not choose to act upon it, that is his own look out."

I assured Poirot that he could rely upon my discretion.

"C'est bien! Let us then employ our little grey cells. Tell me, my friend, at what time, according to you, did the tragedy take place?"

"Why, at two o'clock or thereabouts," I said, astonished. "You remember, Mrs. Renauld told us that she heard the clock strike while the men were in the room."

"Exactly, and on the strength of that, you, the examining magistrate, Bex, and every one else, accept the time without further question. But I, Hercule Poirot, say that Madame Renauld lied. *The crime took place at least two hours earlier.*"

"But the doctors—"

"They declared, after examination of the body, that death had taken place between ten and seven hours previously. *Mon ami,* for some reason, it was imperative that the crime should seem to have taken place later than it actually did. You have read of a smashed watch or clock recording the exact hour of a crime? So that the time should not rest on Mrs. Renauld's testimony alone, some one moved on the hands of that wrist watch to two o'clock, and then dashed it violently to the ground. But, as is often the case, they defeated their own object. The glass was smashed, but the mechanism of the watch was uninjured. It was a most disastrous manoeuvre on their part, for it at once drew my attention to two points—first, that Madame Renauld was lying: secondly, that there must be some vital reason for the postponement of the time."

"But what reason could there be?"

"Ah, that is the question! There we have the whole mystery. As yet, I cannot explain it. There is only one idea that presents itself to me as having a possible connection."

"And that is?"

"The last train left Merlinville at seventeen minutes past twelve."

I followed it out slowly.

"So that, the crime apparently taking place some two hours later, any one leaving by that train would have an unimpeachable alibi!"

"Perfect, Hastings! You have it!"

I sprang up.

"But we must inquire at the station. Surely they cannot have failed to notice two foreigners who left by that train! We must go there at once!"

"You think so, Hastings?"

"Of course. Let us go there now."

Poirot restrained my ardour with a light touch upon the arm.

"Go by all means if you wish, *mon ami*—but if you go, I should not ask for particulars of two foreigners."

I stared, and he said rather impatiently:

"Là là, you do not believe all that rigmarole, do you? The masked men and all the rest of *cette histoire-là!*"

His words took me so much aback that I hardly knew how to respond. He went on serenely:

"You heard me say to Giraud, did you not, that all the details of this crime were familiar to me? *Eh bien,* that presupposes one of two things, either the brain that planned the first crime also planned this one, or else an account read of a *cause célèbre* unconsciously remained in our assassin's memory and prompted the details. I shall be able to pronounce definitely on that after—" he broke off.

I was revolving sundry matters in my mind.

"But Mr. Renauld's letter? It distinctly mentions a secret and Santiago?"

"Undoubtedly there was a secret in M. Renauld's life—there can be no doubt of that. On the other hand, the word Santiago, to my mind, is a red herring, dragged continually across the track to put us off the scent. It is possible that it was used in the same way on M. Renauld, to keep him from directing his suspicious into a quarter nearer at hand. Oh, be assured, Hastings, the danger that threatened him was not in Santiago, it was near at hand, in France."

He spoke so gravely, and with such assurance, that I could not fail to be convinced. But I essayed one final objection:

"And the match and cigarette end found near the body? What of them."

A light of pure enjoyment lit up Poirot's face.

"Planted! Deliberately planted there for Giraud or one of his tribe to find! Ah, he is smart, Giraud, he can do his tricks! So can a good retriever dog. He comes in so pleased with himself. For hours he has crawled on his stomach. 'See what I have found,' he says. And then again to me: 'What do you see here?' Me, I answer, with profound and deep truth, 'Nothing.' And Giraud, the great Giraud, he laughs, he thinks to himself, 'Oh, that he is imbecile, this old one!' *But we shall see.* . . ."

But my mind had reverted to the main facts.

"Then all this story of the masked men—?"

"Is false."

"What really happened?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"One person could tell us—Madame Renauld. But she will not speak. Threats and entreaties would not move her. A remarkable woman that, Hastings. I recognized as soon as I saw her that I had to deal with a woman of unusual character. At first, as I told you, I was inclined to suspect her of being concerned in the crime. Afterwards I altered my opinion."

"What made you do that?"

"Her spontaneous and genuine grief at the sight of her husband's body. I could swear that the agony in that cry of hers was genuine."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully, "one cannot mistake these things."

"I beg your pardon, my friend—one can always be mistaken. Regard a great actress, does not her acting of grief carry you away and impress you with its reality? No, however strong my own impression and belief, I needed other evidence before I allowed myself to be satisfied. The great criminal can be a great actor. I base my certainty in this case, not upon my own impression, but upon the undeniable fact that Mrs. Renauld actually fainted. I turned up her eyelids and felt her pulse. There was no deception—the swoon was genuine. Therefore I was satisfied that her anguish was real and not assumed. Besides, a small additional point not without interest, it was unnecessary for Mrs. Renauld to exhibit unrestrained grief. She had had one paroxysm on learning of her husband's death, and there would be no need for her to simulate another such a violent one on beholding his body. No, Mrs. Renauld was not her husband's murderess. But why has she lied? She lied about the wrist watch, she lied about the masked men—she lied about a third thing. Tell me, Hastings, what is your explanation of the open door?"

"Well," I said, rather embarrassed, "I suppose it was an oversight. They forgot to shut it."

Poirot shook his head, and sighed.

"That is the explanation of Giraud. It does not satisfy me. There is a meaning behind that open door which for a moment I cannot fathom."

"I have an idea," I cried suddenly.

"A la bonne heure! Let us hear it."

"Listen. We are agreed that Mrs. Renauld's story is a fabrication. Is it not possible, then, that Mr. Renauld left the house to keep an appointment—possibly with the murderer—leaving the front door open for his return. But he did not return, and the next morning he is found, stabbed in the back."

"An admirable theory, Hastings, but for two facts which you have characteristically overlooked. In the first place, who gagged and bound Madame Renauld? And why on earth should they return to the house to do so? In the second place, no man on earth would go out to keep an appointment wearing his underclothes and an overcoat. There are circumstances in which a man might wear pajamas and an overcoat—but the other, never!"

"True," I said, rather crest-fallen.

"No," continued Poirot, "we must look elsewhere for a solution of the open door mystery. One thing I am fairly sure of—they did not leave through the door. They left by the window."

"What?"

"Precisely."

"But there were no footmarks in the flower bed underneath."

"No—*and there ought to have been.* Listen, Hastings. The gardener, Auguste, as you heard him say, planted both those beds the preceding afternoon. In the one there are plentiful impressions of his big hobnailed boots—in the other, *none!* You see? Some one had passed that way, some one who, to obliterate their footprints, smoothed over the surface of the bed with a rake."

"Where did they get a rake."

"Where they got the spade and the gardening gloves," said Poirot impatiently. "There is no difficulty about that."

"What makes you think that they left that way, though? Surely it is more probable that they entered by the window, and left by the door."

"That is possible of course. Yet I have a strong idea that they left by the window."

"I think you are wrong."

"Perhaps, *mon ami.*"

I mused, thinking over the new field of conjecture that Poirot's deductions had opened up to me. I recalled my wonder at his cryptic allusions to the flower bed and the wrist watch. His remarks had seemed so meaningless at the moment and now, for the first time, I realized how remarkably, from a few slight incidents, he had unravelled much of the mystery that surrounded the case. I paid a belated homage to my friend. As though he read my thoughts, he nodded sagely.

"Method, you comprehend! Method! Arrange your facts. Arrange your ideas. And if some little fact will not fit in—do not reject it but consider it closely. Though its significance escapes you, be sure that it *is* significant."

"In the meantime," I said, considering, "although we know a great deal more than we did, we are no nearer to solving the mystery of who killed Mr. Renauld."

"No," said Poirot cheerfully. "In fact we are a great deal further off."

The fact seemed to afford him such peculiar satisfaction that I gazed at him in wonder. He met my eye and smiled.

"But yes, it is better so. Before, there was at all events a clear theory as to how and by whose hands he met his death. Now that is all gone. We are in darkness. A hundred conflicting points confuse and worry us. That is well. That is excellent. Out of confusion comes forth order. But if you find order to start with, if a crime seems simple and above-board, *eh, bien, méfiez vous!* It is, how do you say it?—*cooked!* The great criminal is simple—but very few criminals *are* great. In trying to cover up their tracks, they invariably betray themselves. Ah, *mon ami,* I would that some day I could meet a really great criminal—one who commits his crime, and then—does nothing! Even I, Hercule Poirot, might fail to catch such a one."

But I had not followed his words. A light had burst upon me.

"Poirot! Mrs. Renauld! I see it now. She must be shielding somebody."

From the quietness with which Poirot received my remark, I could see that the idea had already occurred to him.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Shielding some one—or screening some one. One of the two."

I saw very little difference between the two words, but I developed my theme with a good deal of earnestness. Poirot maintained a strictly noncommittal attitude, repeating:

"It may be—yes, it may be. But as yet I do not know! There is something very deep underneath all this. You will see. Something very deep."

Then, as we entered our hotel, he enjoined silence on me with a gesture.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GIRL WITH THE ANXIOUS EYES

We lunched with an excellent appetite. I understood well enough that Poirot did not wish to discuss the tragedy where we could so easily be overheard. But, as is usual when one topic fills the mind to the exclusion of everything else, no other subject of interest seemed to present itself. For a while we ate in silence, and then Poirot observed maliciously:

"Eh bien! And your indiscretions! You recount them not?"

I felt myself blushing.

"Oh, you mean this morning?" I endeavoured to adopt a tone of absolute nonchalance.

But I was no match for Poirot. In a very few minutes he had extracted the whole story from me, his eyes twinkling as he did so.

"Tiens! A story of the most romantic. What is her name, this charming young lady?"

I had to confess that I did not know.

"Still more romantic! The first *rencontre* in the train from Paris, the second here. Journeys end in lovers' meetings, is not that the saying?"

"Don't be an ass, Poirot."

"Yesterday it was Mademoiselle Daubreuil, today it is Mademoiselle—Cinderella! Decidedly you have the heart of a Turk, Hastings! You should establish a harem!"

"It's all very well to rag me. Mademoiselle Daubreuil is a very beautiful girl, and I do admire her immensely—I don't mind admitting it. The other's nothing—I don't suppose I shall ever see her again. She was quite amusing to talk to just for a railway journey, but she's not the kind of girl I should ever get keen on."

"Why?"

"Well—it sounds snobbish perhaps—but she's not a lady, not in any sense of the word."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. There was less raillery in his voice as he asked:

"You believe, then, in birth and breeding?"

"I may be old-fashioned, but I certainly don't believe in marrying out of one's class. It never answers."

"I agree with you, *mon ami.* Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it is as you say. But there is always the hundredth time! Still, that does not arise, as you do not propose to see the lady again."

His last words were almost a question, and I was aware of the sharpness with which he darted a glance at me. And before my eyes, writ large in letters of fire, I saw the words, "Hôtel du Phare," and I heard again her voice saying "Come and look me up" and my own answering with *empressement:* "I will."

Well, what of it? I had meant to go at the time. But since then, I had had time to reflect. I did not like the girl. Thinking it over in cold blood, I came definitely to the conclusion that I disliked her intensely. I had got hauled over the coals for foolishly gratifying her morbid curiosity, and I had not the least wish to see her again.

I answered Poirot lightly enough.

"She asked me to look her up, but of course I shan't."

"Why 'of course'?"

"Well—I don't want to."

"I see." He studied me attentively for some minutes. "Yes. I see very well. And you are wise. Stick to what you have said."

"That seems to be your invariable advice," I remarked, rather piqued.

"Ah, my friend, have faith in Papa Poirot. Some day, if you permit, I will arrange you a marriage of great suitability."

"Thank you," I said laughing, "but the prospect leaves me cold."

Poirot sighed and shook his head.

"Les Anglais!" he murmured. "No method—absolutely none whatever. They leave all to chance!" He frowned, and altered the position of the salt cellar. "Mademoiselle Cinderella is staying at the Hôtel d'Angleterre you told me, did you not?"

"No. Hôtel du Phare."

"True, I forgot."

A moment's misgiving shot across my mind. Surely I had never mentioned any hotel to Poirot. I looked across at him, and felt reassured. He was cutting his bread into neat little squares, completely absorbed in his task. He must have fancied I had told him where the girl was staying.

We had coffee outside facing the sea. Poirot smoked one of his tiny cigarettes, and then drew his watch from his pocket.

"The train to Paris leaves at 2:25," he observed. "I should be starting."

"Paris?" I cried.

"That is what I said, *mon ami.*"

"You are going to Paris? But why?"

He replied very seriously.

"To look for the murderer of M. Renauld."

"You think he is in Paris?"

"I am quite certain that he is not. Nevertheless, it is there that I must look for him. You do not understand, but I will explain it all to you in good time. Believe me, this journey to Paris is necessary. I shall not be away long. In all probability I shall return tomorrow. I do not propose that you should accompany me. Remain here and keep an eye on Giraud. Also cultivate the society of M. Renauld *fils.* And thirdly, if you wish, endeavour to cut him out with Mademoiselle Marthe. But I fear you will not have great success."

I did not quite relish the last remark.

"That reminds me," I said. "I meant to ask you how you knew about those two?"

"Mon ami— I know human nature. Throw together a boy like young Renauld and a beautiful girl like Mademoiselle Marthe, and the result is almost inevitable. Then, the quarrel! It was money or a woman and, remembering Léonie's description of the lad's anger, I decided on the latter. So I made my guess—and I was right."

"And that was why you warned me against setting my heart on the lady? You already suspected that she loved young Renauld?"

Poirot smiled.

"At any rate,—*I saw that she had anxious eyes.* That is how I always think of Mademoiselle Daubreuil—*as the girl with the anxious eyes.* . . ."

His voice was so grave that it impressed me uncomfortably.

"What do you mean by that, Poirot?"

"I fancy, my friend, that we shall see before very long. But I must start."

"You've oceans of time."

"Perhaps—perhaps. But I like plenty of leisure at the station. I do not wish to rush, to hurry, to excite myself."

"At all events," I said, rising, "I will come and see you off."

"You will do nothing of the sort. I forbid it."

He was so peremptory that I stared at him in surprise. He nodded emphatically.

"I mean it, *mon ami.* Au revoir! You permit that I embrace you? Ah, no, I forget that it is not the English custom. Une poignee de main, alors."

I felt rather at a loose end after Poirot had left me. I strolled down the beach, and watched the bathers, without feeling energetic enough to join them. I rather fancied that Cinderella might be disporting herself amongst them in some wonderful costume, but I saw no signs of her. I strolled aimlessly along the sands towards the further end of the town. It occurred to me that, after all, it would only be decent feeling on my part to inquire after the girl. And it would save trouble in the end. The matter would then be finished with. There would be no need for me to trouble about her any further. But, if I did not go at all, she might quite possibly come and look me up at the Villa. And that would be annoying in every way. Decidedly it would be better to pay a short call, in the course of which I could make it quite clear that I could do nothing further for her in my capacity of showman.

Accordingly I left the beach, and walked inland. I soon found the Hôtel du Phare, a very unpretentious building. It was annoying in the extreme not to know the lady's name and, to save my dignity, I decided to stroll inside and look around. Probably I should find her in the lounge. Merlinville was a small place, you left your hotel to go to the beach, and you left the beach to return to the hotel. There were no other attractions. There was a Casino being built, but it was not yet completed.

I had walked the length of the beach without seeing her, therefore she must be in the hotel. I went in. Several people were sitting in the tiny lounge, but my quarry was not amongst them. I looked into some other rooms, but there was no sign of her. I waited for some time, till my impatience got the better of me. I took the concierge aside, and slipped five francs into his hand.

"I wish to see a lady who is staying here. A young English lady, small and dark. I am not sure of her name."

The man shook his head, and seemed to be suppressing a grin.

"There is no such lady as you describe staying here."

"She is American possibly," I suggested. These fellows are so stupid.

But the man continued to shake his head.

"No, monsieur. There are only six or seven English and American ladies altogether, and they are all much older than the lady you are seeking. It is not here that you will find her, monsieur."

He was so positive that I felt doubts.

"But the lady told me she was staying here."

"Monsieur must have made a mistake—or it is more likely the lady did, since there has been another gentleman here inquiring for her."

"What is that you say?" I cried, surprised.

"But yes, monsieur. A gentleman who described her just as you have done."

"What was he like?"

"He was a small gentleman, well dressed, very neat, very spotless, the moustache very stiff, the head of a peculiar shape, and the eyes green."

Poirot! So that was why he refused to let me accompany him to the station. The impertinence of it! I would thank him not to meddle in my concerns. Did he fancy I needed a nurse to look after me?

Thanking the man, I departed, somewhat at a loss, and still much incensed with my meddlesome friend. I regretted that he was, for the moment, out of reach. I should have enjoyed telling him what I thought of his unwarranted interference. Had I not distinctly told him that I had no intention of seeing the girl? Decidedly, one's friends can be too zealous!

But where was the lady? I set aside my wrath, and tried to puzzle it out. Evidently, through inadvertence, she had named the wrong hotel. Then another thought struck me. Was it inadvertence? Or had she deliberately withheld her name and given me the wrong address?

The more I thought about it, the more I felt convinced that this last surmise of mine was right. For some reason or other she did not wish to let the acquaintance ripen into friendship. And though half an hour earlier this had been precisely my own view, I did not enjoy having the tables turned upon me. The whole affair was profoundly unsatisfactory, and I went up to the Villa Geneviève in a condition of distinct ill humour. I did not go to the house, but went up the path to the little bench by the shed, and sat there moodily enough.

I was distracted from my thoughts by the sound of voices close at hand. In a second or two I realized that they came, not from the garden I was in, but from the adjoining garden of the Villa Marguerite, and that they were approaching rapidly. A girl's voice was speaking, a voice that I recognized as that of the beautiful Marthe.

"Chéri," she was saying, "is it really true? Are all our troubles over."

"You know it, Marthe," Jack Renauld replied. "Nothing can part us now, beloved. The last obstacle to our union is removed. Nothing can take you from me."

"Nothing?" the girl murmured. "Oh, Jack, Jack—I am afraid."

I had moved to depart, realizing that I was quite unintentionally eavesdropping. As I rose to my feet, I caught sight of them through a gap in the hedge. They stood together facing me, the man's arm round the girl, his eyes looking into hers. They were a splendid looking couple, the dark, well-knit boy, and the fair young goddess. They seemed made for each other as they stood there, happy in spite of the terrible tragedy that overshadowed their young lives.

But the girl's face was troubled, and Jack Renauld seemed to recognize it, as he held her closer to him and asked.

"But what are you afraid of, darling? What is there to fear—now?"

And then I saw the look in her eyes, the look Poirot had spoken of, as she murmured, so that I almost guessed at the words.

"I am afraid—for *you*. . . ."

I did not hear young Renauld's answer, for my attention was distracted by an unusual appearance a little further down the hedge. There appeared to be a brown bush there, which seemed odd, to say the least of it, so early in the summer. I stepped along to investigate, but, at my advance, the brown bush withdrew itself precipitately, and faced me with a finger to its lips. It was Giraud.

Enjoining caution, he led the way round the shed until we were out of ear-shot.

"What were you doing there?" I asked.

"Exactly what you were doing—listening."

"But I was not there on purpose!"

"Ah!" said Giraud. "I was."

As always, I admired the man whilst disliking him. He looked me up and down with a sort of contemptuous disfavour.

"You didn't help matters by butting in. I might have heard something useful in a minute. What have you done with your old fossil?"

"M. Poirot has gone to Paris," I replied coldly. "And I can tell you, M. Giraud, that he is anything but an old fossil. He has solved many cases that have completely baffled the English police."

"Bah! The English police!" Giraud snapped his fingers disdainfully. "They must be on a level with our examining magistrates. So he has gone to Paris, has he? Well, a good thing. The longer he stays there, the better. But what does he think he will find there?"

I thought I read in the question a tinge of uneasiness. I drew myself up.

"That I am not at liberty to say," I said quietly.

Giraud subjected me to a piercing stare.

"He has probably enough sense not to tell *you,*" he remarked rudely. "Good afternoon. I'm busy."

And with that, he turned on his heel, and left me without ceremony. Matters seemed at a standstill at the Villa Geneviève. Giraud evidently did not desire my company and, from what I had seen, it seemed fairly certain that Jack Renauld did not either.

I went back to the town, had an enjoyable bath and returned to the hotel. I turned in early, wondering whether the following day would bring forth anything of interest.

I was wholly unprepared for what it did bring forth. I was eating my petit déjeuner in the dining-room, when the waiter, who had been talking to some one outside, came back in obvious excitement. He hesitated for a minute, fidgeting with his napkin, and then burst out.

"Monsieur will pardon me, but he is connected, is he not, with the affair at the Villa Geneviève?"

"Yes," I said eagerly. "Why?"

"Monsieur has not heard the news, though?"

"What news?"

"That there has been another murder there last night."

"What?"

Leaving my breakfast, I caught up my hat and ran as fast as I could. Another murder—and Poirot away! What fatality. But who had been murdered?

I dashed in at the gate. A group of the servants was in the drive, talking and gesticulating. I caught hold of Françoise.

"What has happened?"

"Oh, monsieur! monsieur! Another death! It is terrible. There is a curse upon the house. But yes, I say it, a curse! They should send for M. le curé to bring some holy water. Never will I sleep another night under that roof. It might be my turn, who knows?"

She crossed herself.

"Yes," I cried, "but who has been killed?"

"Do I know—me? A man—a stranger. They found him up there—in the shed—not a hundred yards from where they found poor Monsieur. And that is not all. He is stabbed—stabbed to the heart *with the same dagger!*"

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECOND BODY

WAITING FOR no more, I turned and ran up the path to the shed. The two men on guard there stood aside to let me pass and, filled with excitement, I entered.

The light was dim, the place was a mere rough wooden erection to keep old pots and tools in. I had entered impetuously, but on the threshold I checked myself, fascinated by the spectacle before me.

Giraud was on his hands and knees, a pocket torch in his hand with which he was examining every inch of the ground. He looked up with a frown at my entrance, then his face relaxed a little in a sort of good-humoured contempt.

"Ah, *c'est l'Anglais!* Enter then. Let us see what you can make of this affair."

Rather stung by his tone, I stooped my head, and passed in.

"There he is," said Giraud, flashing his torch to the far corner.

I stepped across.

The dead man lay straight upon his back. He was of medium height, swarthy of complexion, and possibly about fifty years of age. He was neatly dressed in a dark blue suit, well cut and probably made by an expensive tailor, but not new. His face was terribly convulsed, and on his left side, just over the heart, the hilt of a dagger stood up, black and shinning. I recognized it. It was the same dagger I had seen reposing in the glass jar the preceding morning!

"I'm expecting the doctor any minute," explained Giraud. "Although we hardly need him. There's no doubt what the man died of. He was stabbed to the heart, and death must have been pretty well instantaneous."

"When was it done? Last night?"

Giraud shook his head.

"Hardly. I don't lay down the law on medical evidence, but the man's been dead well over twelve hours. When do you say you last saw that dagger?"

"About ten o'clock yesterday morning."

"Then I should be inclined to fix the crime as being done not long after that."

"But people were passing and repassing this shed continually."

Giraud laughed disagreeably.

"You progress to a marvel! Who told you he was killed in this shed?"

"Well—" I felt flustered. "I—I assumed it."

"Oh, what a fine detective! Look at him, *mon petit*—does a man stabbed to the heart fall like that—neatly with his feet together, and his arms to his side? No. Again does a man lie down on his back and permit himself to be stabbed without raising a hand to defend himself? It is absurd, is it not? But see here—and here—" He flashed the torch along the ground. I saw curious irregular marks in the soft dirt. "He was dragged here after he was dead. Half dragged, half carried by two people. Their tracks do not show on the hard ground outside, and here they have been careful to obliterate them—but one of the two was a woman, my young friend."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"But if the tracks are obliterated, how do you know?"

"Because, blurred as they are, the prints of the woman's shoe are unmistakable. Also, by *this*—" And, leaning forward, he drew something from the handle of the dagger and held it up for me to see. It was a woman's long black hair—similar to the one Poirot had taken from the arm-chair in the library.

With a slightly ironic smile he wound it round the dagger again.

"We will leave things as they are as much as possible," he explained. "It pleases the examining magistrate. *Eh bien,* do you notice anything else?"

I was forced to shake my head.

"Look at his hands."

I did. The nails were broken and discoloured, and the skin was hard. It hardly enlightened me as much as I should have liked it to have done. I looked up at Giraud.

"They are not the hands of a gentleman," he said, answering my look. "On the contrary his clothes are those of a well-to-do man. That is curious, is it not?"

"Very curious," I agreed.

"And none of his clothing is marked. What do we learn from that? This man was trying to pass himself off as other than he was. He was masquerading. Why? Did he fear something? Was he trying to escape by disguising himself? As yet we do not know, but one thing we do know—he was as anxious to conceal his identity as we are to discover it."

He looked down at the body again.

"As before there are no finger-prints on the handle of the dagger. The murderer again wore gloves."

"You think, then, that the murderer was the same in both cases?" I asked eagerly.

Giraud became inscrutable.

"Never mind what I think. We shall see. Marchaud!"

The *sergent de ville* appeared at the doorway.

"Monsieur?"

"Why is Madame Renauld not here? I sent for her a quarter of an hour ago?"

"She is coming up the path now, monsieur, and her son with her."

"Good. I only want one at a time, though."

Marchaud saluted and disappeared again. A moment later he reappeared with Mrs. Renauld.

"Here is Madame."

Giraud came forward with a curt bow.

"This way, madame." He led her across, and then, standing suddenly aside. "Here is the man. Do you know him?"

And as he spoke, his eyes, gimlet-like, bored into her face, seeking to read her mind, noting every indication of her manner.

But Mrs. Renauld remained perfectly calm—too calm, I felt. She looked down at the corpse almost without interest, certainly without any sign of agitation or recognition.

"No," she said. "I have never seen him in my life. He is quite a stranger to me."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"You do not recognize in him one of your assailants, for instance?"

"No," she seemed to hesitate, as though struck by the idea. "No, I do not think so. Of course they wore beards—false ones the examining magistrate thought, but still—no." Now she seemed to make her mind up definitely. "I am sure neither of the two was this man."

"Very well, madame. That is all, then."

She stepped out with her head erect, the sun flashing on the silver threads in her hair. Jack Renauld succeeded her. He, too, failed to identify the man, in a completely natural manner.

Giraud merely grunted. Whether he was pleased or chagrined I could not tell. He merely called to Marchaud:

"You have got the other there?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Bring her in then."

"The other" was Madame Daubreuil. She came indignantly, protesting with vehemence.

"I object, monsieur! This is an outrage! What have I to do with all this?"

"Madame," said Giraud brutally, "I am investigating not one murder, but two murders! For all I know you may have committed them both."

"How dare you?" she cried. "How dare you insult me by such a wild accusation! It is infamous."

"Infamous, is it? What about this?" Stooping, he again detached the hair, and held it up. "Do you see this, madame?" He advanced towards her. "You permit that I see whether it matches?"

With a cry she started backwards, white to the lips.

"It is false—I swear it. I know nothing of the crime—of either crime. Any one who says I do lies! Ah! *mon Dieu,* what shall I do?"

"Calm yourself, madame," said Giraud coldly. "No one has accused you as yet. But you will do well to answer my questions without more ado."

"Anything you wish, monsieur."

"Look at the dead man. Have you ever seen him before?"

Drawing nearer, a little of the colour creeping back to her face, Madame Daubreuil looked down at the victim with a certain amount of interest and curiosity. Then she shook her head.

"I do not know him."

It seemed impossible to doubt her, the words came so naturally. Giraud dismissed her with a nod of the head.

"You are letting her go?" I asked in a low voice. "Is that wise? Surely that black hair is from her head."

"I do not need teaching my business," said Giraud dryly. "She is under surveillance. I have no wish to arrest her as yet."

Then, frowning, he gazed down at the body.

"Should you say that was a Spanish type at all?" he asked suddenly.

I considered the face carefully.

"No," I said at last. "I should put him down as a Frenchman most decidedly."

Giraud gave a grunt of dissatisfaction.

"Same here."

He stood there for a moment, then with an imperative gesture he waved me aside, and once more, on hands and knees, he continued his search of the floor of the shed. He was marvellous. Nothing escaped him. Inch by inch he went over the floor, turning over pots, examining old sacks. He pounced on a bundle by the door, but it proved to be only a ragged coat and trousers, and he flung it down again with a snarl. Two pairs of old gloves interested him, but in the end he shook his head and laid them aside. Then he went back to the pots, methodically turning them over one by one. In the end, he rose to his feet, and shook his head thoughtfully. He seemed baffled and perplexed. I think he had forgotten my presence.

But, at that moment, a stir and bustle was heard outside, and our old friend, the examining magistrate, accompanied by his clerk and M. Bex, with the doctor behind them, came bustling in.

"But this is extraordinary, M. Giraud," cried M. Hautet "Another crime! Ah, we have not got to the bottom of this case. There is some deep mystery here. But who is the victim this time?"

"That is just what nobody can tell us, M. le juge. He has not been identified."

"Where is the body?" asked the doctor.

Giraud moved aside a little.

"There in the corner. He has been stabbed to the heart, as you see. And with the dagger that was stolen yesterday morning. I fancy that the murder followed hard upon the theft—but that is for you to say. You can handle the dagger freely—there are no finger-prints on it."

The doctor knelt down by the dead man, and Giraud turned to the examining magistrate.

"A pretty little problem, is it not? But I shall solve it."

"And so no one can identify him," mused the magistrate. "Could it possibly be one of the assassins? They may have fallen out among themselves."

Giraud shook his head.

"The man is a Frenchman—I would take my oath of that—"

But at that moment they were interrupted by the doctor who was sitting back on his heels with a perplexed expression.

"You say he was killed yesterday morning?"

"I fix it by the theft of the dagger," explained Giraud. "He may, of course, have been killed later in the day."

"Later in the day? Fiddlesticks! This man has been dead at least forty-eight hours, and probably longer."

We stared at each other in blank amazement.

CHAPTER XV

A PHOTOGRAPH

THE DOCTOR'S words were so surprising that we were all momentarily taken aback. Here was a man stabbed with a dagger which we knew to have been stolen only twenty-four hours previously, and yet Dr. Durand asserted positively that he had been dead at least forty-eight hours! The whole thing was fantastic to the last extreme.

We were still recovering from the surprise of the doctor's announcement, when a telegram was brought to me. It had been sent up from the hotel to the Villa. I tore it open. It was from Poirot, and announced his return by the train arriving at Merlinville at 12:28.

I looked at my watch and saw that I had just time to get comfortably to the station and meet him there. I felt that it was of the utmost importance that he should know at once of the new and startling developments in the case.

Evidently, I reflected, Poirot had had no difficulty in finding what he wanted in Paris. The quickness of his return proved that. Very few hours had sufficed. I wondered how he would take the exciting news I had to impart.

The train was some minutes late, and I strolled aimlessly up and down the platform, until it occurred to me that I might pass the time by asking a few questions as to who had left Merlinville by the last train on the evening of the tragedy.

I approached the chief porter, an intelligent looking man, and had little difficulty in persuading him to enter upon the subject. It was a disgrace to the Police, he hotly affirmed, that such brigands of assassins should be allowed to go about unpunished. I hinted that there was some possibility they might have left by the midnight train, but he negatived the idea decidedly. He would have noticed two foreigners—he was sure of it. Only about twenty people had left by the train, and he could not have failed to observe them.

I do not know what put the idea into my head—possibly it was the deep anxiety underlying Marthe Daubreuil's tones—but I asked suddenly:

"Young M. Renauld—he did not leave by that train, did he?"

"Ah, no, monsieur. To arrive and start off again within half an hour, it would not be amusing, that!"

I stared at the man, the significance of his words almost escaping me. Then I saw. . . .

"You mean," I said, my heart beating a little, "that M. Jack Renauld arrived at Merlinville that evening?"

"But yes, monsieur. By the last train arriving the other way, the 11:40."

My brain whirled. That, then, was the reason of Marthe's poignant anxiety. Jack Renauld had been in Merlinville on the night of the crime! But why had he not said so? Why, on the contrary, had he led us to believe that he had remained in Cherbourg? Remembering his frank boyish countenance, I could hardly bring myself to believe that he had any connection with the crime. Yet why this silence on his part about so vital a matter? One thing was certain, Marthe had known all along. Hence her anxiety, and her eager questioning of Poirot to know whether any one were suspected.

My cogitations were interrupted by the arrival of the train, and in another moment I was greeting Poirot. The little man was radiant. He beamed and vociferated and, forgetting my English reluctance, embraced me warmly on the platform.

"*Mon cher ami,* I have succeeded—but succeeded to a marvel!"

"Indeed? I'm delighted to hear it. Have you heard the latest here?"

"How would you that I should hear anything? There have been some developments, eh? The brave Giraud, he has made an arrest? Or even arrests perhaps? Ah, but I will make him look foolish, that one! But where are you taking me, my friend? Do we not go to the hotel? It is necessary that I attend to my moustaches—they are deplorably limp from the heat of travelling. Also, without doubt, there is dust on my coat. And my tie, that I must rearrange."

I cut short his remonstrances.

"My dear Poirot—never mind all that. We must go to the Villa at once. *There has been another murder!*"

I have frequently been disappointed when fancying that I was giving news of importance to my friend. Either he has known it already or he has dismissed it as irrelevant to the main issue—and in the latter case events have usually proved him justified. But this time I could not complain of missing my effect. Never have I seen a man so flabbergasted. His jaw dropped. All the jauntiness went out of his bearing. He stared at me open-mouthed.

"What is that you say? Another murder? Ah, then, I am all wrong. I have failed. Giraud may mock himself at me—he will have reason!"

"You did not expect it, then?"

"I? Not the least in the world. It demolishes my theory—it ruins everything—it—ah, no!" He stopped dead, thumping himself on the chest. "It is impossible. I *cannot* be wrong! The facts, taken methodically and in their proper order admit of only one explanation. I must be right! I *am* right!"

"But then—"

He interrupted me.

"Wait, my friend. I must be right, therefore this new murder is impossible unless—unless—oh, wait, I implore you. Say no word—"

He was silent for a moment or two, then, resuming his normal manner, he said in a quiet assured voice.

"The victim is a man of middle-age. His body was found in the locked shed near the scene of the crime and had been dead at least forty-eight hours. And it is most probable that he was stabbed in a similar manner to M. Renauld, though not necessarily in the back."

It was my turn to gape—and gape I did. In all my knowledge of Poirot he had never done anything so amazing as this. And, almost inevitably, a doubt crossed my mind.

"Poirot," I cried, "you're pulling my leg. You've heard all about it already."

He turned his earnest gaze upon me reproachfully.

"Would I do such a thing? I assure you that I have heard nothing whatsoever. Did you not observe the shock your news was to me?"

"But how on earth could you know all that?"

"I was right then? But I knew it. The little grey cells, my friend, the little grey cells! They told me. Thus, and in no other way, could there have been a second death. Now tell me all. If we go round to the left here, we can take a short cut across the golf links which will bring us to the back of the Villa Geneviève much more quickly."

As we walked, taking the way he had indicated, I recounted all I knew. Poirot listened attentively.

"The dagger was in the wound, you say? That is curious. You are sure it was the same one?"

"Absolutely certain. That's what makes it so impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. There may have been two daggers."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Surely that is in the highest degree unlikely? It would be a most extraordinary coincidence."

"You speak as usual, without reflection, Hastings. In some cases two identical weapons *would* be highly improbable. But not here. This particular weapon was a war souvenir which was made to Jack Renauld's orders. It is really highly unlikely, when you come to think of it, that he should have had only one made. Very probably he would have another for his own use."

"But nobody has mentioned such a thing," I objected.

A hint of the lecturer crept into Poirot's tone.

"My friend, in working upon a case, one does not take into account only the things that are 'mentioned.' There is no reason to mention many things which may be important. Equally, there is often an excellent reason for *not* mentioning them. You can take your choice of the two motives."

I was silent, impressed in spite of myself. Another few minutes brought us to the famous shed. We found all our friends there and, after an interchange of polite amenities, Poirot began his task.

Having watched Giraud at work, I was keenly interested. Poirot bestowed but a cursory glance on the surroundings. The only thing he examined was the ragged coat and trousers by the door. A disdainful smile rose to Giraud's lips, and, as though noting it, Poirot flung the bundle down again.

"Old clothes of the gardener's?" he queried.

"Exactly," said Giraud.

Poirot knelt down by the body. His fingers were rapid but methodical. He examined the texture of the clothes, and satisfied himself that there were no marks on them. The boots he subjected to special care, also the dirty and broken finger-nails. Whilst examining the latter he threw a quick question at Giraud.

"You saw these?"

"Yes, I saw them," replied the other. His face remained inscrutable.

Suddenly Poirot stiffened.

"Dr. Durand!"

"Yes?" The doctor came forward.

"There is foam on the lips. You observed it?"

"I didn't notice it, I must admit."

"But you observe it now?"

"Oh, certainly."

Poirot again shot a question at Giraud.

"You noticed it without doubt?"

The other did not reply. Poirot proceeded. The dagger had been withdrawn from the wound. It reposed in a glass jar by the side of the body. Poirot examined it, then he studied the wound closely. When he looked up, his eyes were excited, and shone with the green light I knew so well.

"It is a strange wound, this! It has not bled. There is no stain on the clothes. The blade of the dagger is slightly discoloured, that is all. What do you think, M. le docteur?"

"I can only say that it is most abnormal."

"It is not abnormal at all. It is most simple. The man was stabbed *after he was dead."* And, stilling the clamour of voices that arose with a wave of his hand, Poirot turned to Giraud and added. "M. Giraud agrees with me, do you not, monsieur?"

Whatever Giraud's real belief, he accepted the position without moving a muscle. Calmly and almost scornfully he replied:

"Certainly I agree."

The murmur of surprise and interest broke out again.

"But what an idea!" cried M. Hautet. "To stab a man after he is dead! Barbaric! Unheard of! Some unappeasable hate, perhaps."

"No, M. le juge," said Poirot. "I should fancy it was done quite cold-bloodedly—to create an impression."

"What impression?"

"The impression it nearly did create," returned Poirot oracularly.

M. Bex had been thinking.

"How, then, was the man killed?"

"He was not killed. He died. He died, M. le juge, if I am not much mistaken, of an epileptic fit!"

This statement of Poirot's again aroused considerable excitement. Dr. Durand knelt down again, and made a searching examination. At last he rose to his feet.

"Well, M. le docteur?"

"M. Poirot, I am inclined to believe that you are correct in your assertion. I was misled to begin with. The incontrovertible fact that the man had been stabbed distracted my attention from any other indications."

Poirot was the hero of the hour. The examining magistrate was profuse in compliments. Poirot responded gracefully, and then excused himself on the pretext that neither he nor I had yet lunched, and that he wished to repair the ravages of the journey. As we were about to leave the shed, Giraud approached us.

"One other thing, M. Poirot," he said, in his suave mocking voice. "We found this coiled round the handle of the dagger. A woman's hair."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "A woman's hair? What woman's, I wonder?"

"I wonder also," said Giraud. Then, with a bow, he left us.

"He was insistent, the good Giraud," said Poirot thoughtfully, as we walked towards the hotel. "I wonder in what direction he hopes to mislead me? A woman's hair—h'm!"

We lunched heartily, but I found Poirot somewhat distrait and inattentive. Afterwards we went up to our sitting-room and there I begged him to tell me something of his mysterious journey to Paris.

"Willingly, my friend. I went to Paris to find *this.*"

He took from his pocket a small faded newspaper cutting. It was the reproduction of a woman's photograph. He handed it to me. I uttered an exclamation.

"You recognize it, my friend?"

I nodded. Although the photo obviously dated from very many years back, and the hair was dressed in a different style, the likeness was unmistakable.

"Madame Daubreuil!" I exclaimed.

Poirot shook his head with a smile.

"Not quite correct, my friend. She did not call herself by that name in those days. That is a picture of the notorious Madame Beroldy!"

Madame Beroldy! In a flash the whole thing came back to me. The murder trial that had evoked such world-wide interest.

The Beroldy Case.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEROLDY CASE

SOME TWENTY years or so before the opening of the present story, Monsieur Arnold Beroldy, a native of Lyons, arrived in Paris accompanied by his pretty wife and their little daughter, a mere babe. Monsieur Beroldy was a junior partner in a firm of wine merchants, a stout middle-aged man, fond of the good things of life, devoted to his charming wife, and altogether unremarkable in every way. The firm in which Monsieur Beroldy was a partner was a small one, and although doing well, it did not yield a large income to the junior partner. The Beroldys had a small apartment and lived in a very modest fashion to begin with.

But unremarkable though Monsieur Beroldy might be, his wife was plentifully gilded with the brush of Romance. Young and good looking, and gifted withal with a singular charm of manner, Madame Beroldy at once created a stir in the quarter, especially when it began to be whispered that some interesting mystery surrounded her birth. It was rumoured that she was the illegitimate daughter of a Russian Grand Duke. Others asserted that it was an Austrian Archduke, and that the union was legal, though morganatic. But all stories agreed upon one point, that Jeanne Beroldy was the centre of an interesting mystery. Questioned by the curious, Madame Beroldy did not deny these rumours. On the other hand she let it be clearly understood that, though her "lips" were "sealed," all these stories had a foundation in fact. To intimate friends she unburdened herself further, spoke of political intrigues, of "papers," of obscure dangers that threatened her. There was also much talk of Crown jewels that were to be sold secretly, with herself acting as the go-between.

Amongst the friends and acquaintances of the Beroldys was a young lawyer, Georges Conneau. It was soon evident that the fascinating Jeanne had completely enslaved his heart. Madame Beroldy encouraged the young man in a discreet fashion, but being always careful to affirm her complete devotion to her middle-aged husband. Nevertheless, many spiteful persons did not hesitate to declare that young Conneau was her lover—and not the only one!

When the Beroldys had been in Paris about three months, another personage came upon the scene. This was Mr. Hiram P. Trapp, a native of the United States, and extremely wealthy. Introduced to the charming and mysterious Madame Beroldy, he fell a prompt victim to her fascinations. His admiration was obvious, though strictly respectful.

About this time, Madame Beroldy became more outspoken in her confidences. To several friends, she declared herself greatly worried on her husband's behalf. She explained that he had been drawn into several schemes of a political nature, and also referred to some important papers that had been entrusted to him for safekeeping and which concerned a "secret" of far reaching European importance. They had been entrusted to his custody to throw pursuers off the track, but Madame Beroldy was nervous, having recognized several important members of the Revolutionary Circle in Paris.

On the 28th day of November, the blow fell. The woman who came daily to clean and cook for the Beroldys was surprised to find the door of the apartment standing wide open. Hearing faint moans issuing from the bedroom, she went in. A terrible sight met her eyes. Madame Beroldy lay on the floor, bound hand and foot, uttering feeble moans, having managed to free her mouth from a gag. On the bed was Monsieur Beroldy, lying in a pool of blood, with a knife driven through his heart.

Madame Beroldy's story was clear enough. Suddenly awakened from sleep, she had discerned two masked men bending over her. Stifling her cries, they had bound and gagged her. They had then demanded of Monsieur Beroldy the famous "secret."

But the intrepid wine merchant refused point-blank to accede to their request. Angered by his refusal, one of the men incontinently stabbed him through the heart. With the dead man's keys, they had opened the safe in the corner, and had carried away with them a mass of papers. Both men were heavily bearded, and had worn masks, but Madame Beroldy declared positively that they were Russians.

The affair created an immense sensation. It was referred to variously as "the Nihilist Atrocity," "Revolutionaries in Paris," and the "Russian Mystery." Time went on, and the mysterious bearded men were never traced. And then, just as public interest was beginning to die down, a startling development occurred. Madame Beroldy was arrested and charged with the murder of her husband.

The trial, when it came on, aroused widespread interest. The youth and beauty of the accused, and her mysterious history, were sufficient to make of it a *cause célèbre.* People ranged themselves wildly for or against the prisoner. But her partisans received several severe checks to their enthusiasm. The romantic past of Madame Beroldy, her royal blood, and the mysterious intrigues in which she had her being were shown to be mere fantasies of the imagination.

It was proved beyond doubt that Jeanne Beroldy's parents were a highly respectable and prosaic couple, fruit merchants, who lived on the outskirts of Lyons. The Russian Grand Duke, the court intrigues, and the political schemes—all the stories current were traced back to—the lady herself! From her brain had emanated these ingenious myths, and she was proved to have raised a considerable sum of money from various credulous persons by her fiction of the "Crown jewels"—the jewels in question being found to be mere paste imitations. Remorselessly the whole story of her life was laid bare. The motive for the murder was found in Mr. Hiram P. Trapp. Mr. Trapp did his best, but relentlessly and agilely cross-questioned he was forced to admit that he loved the lady, and that, had she been free, he would have asked her to be his wife. The fact that the relations between them were admittedly platonic strengthened the case against the accused. Debarred from becoming his mistress by the simple honourable nature of the man, Jeanne Beroldy had conceived the monstrous project of ridding herself of her elderly undistinguished husband, and becoming the wife of the rich American.

Throughout, Madame Beroldy confronted her accusers with complete sang froid and self possession. Her story never varied. She continued to declare strenuously that she was of royal birth, and that she had been substituted for the daughter of the fruit seller at an early age. Absurd and completely unsubstantiated as these statements were, a great number of people believed implicitly in their truth.

But the prosecution was implacable. It denounced the masked "Russians" as a myth, and asserted that the crime had been committed by Madame Beroldy and her lover, Georges Conneau. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the latter, but he had wisely disappeared. Evidence showed that the bonds which secured Madame Beroldy were so loose that she could easily have freed herself.

And then, towards the close of the trial, a letter, posted in Paris, was sent to the Public Prosecutor. It was from Georges Conneau and, without revealing his whereabouts, it contained a full confession of the crime. He declared that he had indeed struck the fatal blow at Madame Beroldy's instigation. The crime had been planned between them. Believing that her husband ill-treated her, and maddened by his own passion for her, a passion which he believed her to return, he had planned the crime and struck the fatal blow that should free the woman he loved from a hateful bondage. Now, for the first time, he learnt of Mr. Hiram P. Trapp, and realized that the woman he loved had betrayed him! Not for his sake did she wish to be free—but in order to marry the wealthy American. She had used him as a cat's paw, and now, in his jealous rage, he turned and denounced her, declaring that throughout he had acted at her instigation.

And then Madame Beroldy proved herself the remarkable woman she undoubtedly was. Without hesitation, she dropped her previous defence, and admitted that the "Russians" were a pure invention on her part. The real murderer was Georges Conneau. Maddened by passion, he had committed the crime, vowing that if she did not keep silence he would enact a terrible vengeance from her. Terrified by his threats, she had consented—also fearing it likely that if she told the truth she might be accused of conniving at the crime. But she had steadfastly refused to have anything more to do with her husband's murderer, and it was in revenge for this attitude on her part that he had written this letter accusing her. She swore solemnly that she had had nothing to do with the planning of the crime, that she had awoke on that memorable night to find Georges Conneau standing over her, the blood-stained knife in his hand.

It was a touch and go affair. Madame Beroldy's story was hardly credible. But this woman, whose fairy tales of royal intrigues had been so easily accepted, had the supreme art of making herself believed. Her address to the jury was a masterpiece. The tears streaming down her face, she spoke of her child, of her woman's honour—of her desire to keep her reputation untarnished for the child's sake. She admitted that, Georges Conneau having been her lover, she might perhaps be held morally responsible for the crime—but, before God, nothing more! She knew that she had committed a grave fault in not denouncing Conneau to the law, but she declared in a broken voice that that was a thing no woman could have done. . . . She had loved him! Could she let her hand be the one to send him to the Guillotine? She had been guilty of much, but she was innocent of the terrible crime imputed to her.

However that may have been, her eloquence and personality won the day. Madame Beroldy, amidst a scene of unparalleled excitement, was acquitted.

Despite the utmost endeavours of the police, Georges Conneau was never traced. As for Madame Beroldy, nothing more was heard of her. Taking the child with her, she left Paris to begin a new life.

CHAPTER XVII

WE MAKE FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

I HAVE set down the Beroldy case in full. Of course all the details did not present themselves to my memory as I have recounted them here. Nevertheless, I recalled the case fairly accurately. It had attracted a great deal of interest at the time, and had been fully reported by the English papers, so that it did not need much effort of memory on my part to recollect the salient details.

Just for the moment, in my excitement, it seemed to clear up the whole matter. I admit that I am impulsive, and Poirot deplores my custom of jumping to conclusions, but I think I had some excuse in this instance. The remarkable way in which this discovery justified Poirot's point of view struck me at once.

"Poirot," I said, "I congratulate you. I see everything now."

"If that is indeed the truth, *I* congratulate *you, mon ami.* For as a rule you are not famous for seeing—eh, is it not so?"

I felt a little annoyed.

"Come now, don't rub it in. You've been so confoundedly mysterious all along with your hints and your insignificant details that any one might fail to see what you were driving at."

Poirot lit one of his little cigarettes with his usual precision. Then he looked up.

"And since you see everything now, *mon ami,* what exactly is it that you see?"

"Why, that it was Madame Daubreuil—Beroldy, who murdered Mr. Renauld. The similarity of the two cases proves that beyond a doubt."

"Then you consider that Madame Beroldy was wrongly acquitted? That in actual fact she was guilty of connivance in her husband's murder?"

I opened my eyes wide.

"But of course! Don't you?"

Poirot walked to the end of the room, absent-mindedly straightened a chair, and then said thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is my opinion. But there is no 'of course' about it, my friend. Technically speaking, Madame Beroldy is innocent."

"Of that crime, perhaps. But not of this."

Poirot sat down again, and regarded me, his thoughtful air more marked than ever.

"So it is definitely your opinion, Hastings, that Madame Daubreuil murdered M. Renauld?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He shot the question at me with such suddenness that I was taken aback.

"Why?" I stammered. "Why? Oh, because—" I came to a stop.

Poirot nodded his head at me.

"You see, you come to a stumbling-block at once. Why should Madame Daubreuil (I shall call her that for clearness sake) murder M. Renauld? We can find no shadow of a motive. She does not benefit by his death; considered as either mistress or blackmailer she stands to lose. You cannot have a murder without a motive. The first crime was different, there we had a rich lover waiting to step into her husband's shoes."

"Money is not the only motive for murder," I objected.

"True," agreed Poirot placidly. "There are two others, the *crime passionnel* is one. And there is the third rare motive, murder for an idea which implies some form of mental derangement on the part of the murderer. Homicidal mania, and religious fanaticism belong to that class. We can rule it out here."

"But what about the *crime passionnel?* Can you rule that out? If Madame Daubreuil was Renauld's mistress, if she found that his affection was cooling, or if her jealousy was aroused in any way, might she not have struck him down in a moment of anger?"

Poirot shook his head.

"If—I say *if,* you note—Madame Daubreuil was Renauld's mistress, he had not had time to tire of her. And in any case you mistake her character. She is a woman who can simulate great emotional stress. She is a magnificent actress. But, looked at dispassionately, her life disproves her appearance. Throughout, if we examine it, she has been cold-blooded and calculating in her motives and actions. It was not to link her life with that of her young lover that she connived at her husband's murder. The rich American, for whom she probably did not care a button, was her objective. If she committed a crime, she would always do so for gain. Here there was no gain. Besides, how do you account for the digging of the grave? That was a man's work."

"She might have had an accomplice," I suggested, unwilling to relinquish my belief.

"I pass to another objection. You have spoken of the similarity between the two crimes. Wherein does that lie, my friend?"

I stared at him in astonishment.

"Why, Poirot, it was you who remarked on that! The story of the masked men, the 'secret,' the papers!"

Poirot smiled a little.

"Do not be so indignant, I beg of you. I repudiate nothing. The similarity of the two stories links the two cases together inevitably. But reflect now on something very curious. It is not Madame Daubreuil who tells us this tale—if it were all would indeed be plain sailing—it is Madame Renauld. Is she then in league with the other?"

"I can't believe that," I said slowly. "If it is so, she must be the most consummate actress the world has ever known."

"Ta-ta-ta," said Poirot impatiently. "Again you have the sentiment, and not the logic! If it is necessary for a criminal to be a consummate actress, then by all means assume her to be one. But is it necessary? I do not believe Madame Renauld to be in league with Madame Daubreuil for several reasons, some of which I have already enumerated to you. The others are self-evident. Therefore, that possibility eliminated, we draw very near to the truth which is, as always, very curious and interesting."

"Poirot," I cried, "what more do you know?"

"Mon ami, you must make your own deductions. You have 'access to the facts!' Concentrate your grey cells. Reason—not like Giraud—but like Hercule Poirot!"

"But are you *sure?"*

"My friend, in many ways I have been an imbecile. But at last I see clearly."

"You know everything?"

"I have discovered what M. Renauld sent for me to discover."

"And you know the murderer?"

"I know one murderer."

"What do you mean?"

"We talk a little at cross-purposes. There are here not one crime, but two. The first I have solved, the second—*eh bien,* I will confess, I am not sure!"

"But, Poirot, I thought you said the man in the shed had died a natural death?"

"Ta-ta-ta." Poirot made his favourite ejaculation of impatience. "Still you do not understand. One may have a crime without a murderer, but for two crimes it is essential to have two bodies."

His remark struck me as so peculiarly lacking in lucidity that I looked at him in some anxiety. But he appeared perfectly normal. Suddenly he rose and strolled to the window.

"Here he is," he observed.

"Who?"

"M. Jack Renauld. I sent a note up to the Villa to ask him to come here."

That changed the course of my ideas, and I asked Poirot if he knew that Jack Renauld had been in Merlinville on the night of the crime. I had hoped to catch my astute little friend napping, but as usual, he was omniscient. He, too, had inquired at the station.

"And without doubt we are not original in the idea, Hastings. The excellent Giraud, he also has probably made his inquiries."

"You don't think—" I said, and then stopped. "Ah, no, it would be too horrible!"

Poirot looked inquiringly at me, but I said no more. It had just occurred to me that though there were seven women directly or indirectly connected with the case—Mrs. Renauld, Madame Daubreuil and her daughter, the mysterious visitor, and the three servants—there was, with the exception of old Auguste who could hardly count, only one man—Jack Renauld. *And a man must have dug a grave. . . .*

I had no time to develop further the appalling idea that had occurred to me, for Jack Renauld was ushered into the room.

Poirot greeted him in a business-like manner.

"Take a seat, monsieur. I regret infinitely to derange you, but you will perhaps understand that the atmosphere of the Villa is not too congenial to me. M. Giraud and I do not see eye to eye about everything. His politeness to me has not been striking and you will comprehend that I do not intend any little discoveries I may make to benefit him in any way."

"Exactly, M. Poirot," said the lad. "That fellow Giraud is an ill-conditioned brute, and I'd be delighted to see some one score at his expense."

"Then I may ask a little favour of you?"

"Certainly."

"I will ask you to go to the railway station and take a train to the next station along the line, Abbalac. Ask there at the cloak-room whether two foreigners deposited a valise there on the night of the murder. It is a small station, and they are almost certain to remember. Will you do this?"

"Of course I will," said the boy, mystified, though ready for the task.

"I and my friend, you comprehend, have business elsewhere," explained Poirot. "There is a train in a quarter of an hour, and I will ask you not to return to the Villa, as I have no wish for Giraud to get an inkling of your errand."

"Very well, I will go straight to the station."

He rose to his feet. Poirot's voice stopped him.

"One moment, M. Renauld, there is one little matter that puzzles me.

Why did you not mention to M. Hautet this morning that you were in Merlinville on the night of the crime?"

Jack Renauld's face went crimson. With an effort he controlled himself.

"You have made a mistake. I was in Cherbourg, as I told the examining magistrate this morning."

Poirot looked at him, his eyes narrowed, cat-like, until they only showed a gleam of green.

"Then it is a singular mistake that I have made there—for it is shared by the station staff. They say you arrived by the 11:40 train."

For a moment Jack Renauld hesitated, then he made up his mind.

"And if I did? I suppose you do not mean to accuse me of participating in my father's murder?" He asked the question haughtily, his head thrown back.

"I should like an explanation of the reason that brought you here."

"That is simple enough. I came to see my fiancée, Mademoiselle Daubreuil. I was on the eve of a long voyage, uncertain as to when I should return. I wished to see her before I went, to assure her of my unchanging devotion."

"And you did see her?" Poirot's eyes never left the other's face.

There was an appreciable pause before Renauld replied. Then he said:

"Yes."

"And afterwards?"

"I found I had missed the last train. I walked to St. Beauvais where I knocked up a garage and got a car to take me back to Cherbourg."

"St. Beauvais? That is fifteen kilometres. A long walk, M. Renauld."

"I—I felt like walking."

Poirot bowed his head as a sign that he accepted the explanation. Jack Renauld took up his hat and cane and departed. In a trice Poirot jumped to his feet.

"Quick, Hastings. We will go after him."

Keeping a discreet distance behind our quarry, we followed him through the streets of Merlinville. But when Poirot saw that he took the turning to the station, he checked himself.

"All is well. He has taken the bait. He will go to Abbalac, and will inquire for the mythical valise left by the mythical foreigners. Yes, *mon ami,* all that was a little invention of my own."

"You wanted him out of the way!" I exclaimed.

"Your penetration is amazing, Hastings! Now, if you please, we will go up to the Villa Geneviève."

CHAPTER XVIII

GIRAUD ACTS

"BY THE way, Poirot," I said, as we walked along the hot white road, "I've got a bone to pick with you. I dare say you meant well, but really it was no business of yours to go mouching round to the Hôtel du Phare without letting me know."

Poirot shot a quick sidelong glance at me.

"And how did you know I had been there?" he inquired.

Much to my annoyance I felt the colour rising in my cheeks.

"I happened to look in in passing," I explained with as much dignity as I could muster.

I rather feared Poirot's banter, but to my relief, and somewhat to my surprise, he only shook his head with a rather unusual gravity.

"If I have offended your susceptibilities in any way, I demand pardon of you. You will understand better soon. But, believe me, I have striven to concentrate all my energies on the case."

"Oh, it's all right," I said, mollified by the apology. "I know it's only that you have my interests at heart. But I can take care of myself all right."

Poirot seemed to be about to say something further, but checked himself.

Arrived at the Villa, Poirot led the way up to the shed where the second body had been discovered. He did not, however, go in, but paused by the bench which I have mentioned before as being set some few yards away from it. After contemplating it for a moment or two, he paced carefully from it to the hedge which marked the boundary between the Villa Geneviève and the Villa Marguerite. Then he paced back again, nodding his head as he did so. Returning again to the hedge, he parted the bushes with his hands.

"With good fortune," he remarked to me over his shoulder, "Mademoiselle Marthe may find herself in the garden. I desire to speak to her and would prefer not to call formally at the Villa Marguerite. Ah, all is well, there she is. Pst, mademoiselle! Pst! *Un moment, s'il vous plaît.*"

I joined him at the moment that Marthe Daubreuil, looking slightly startled, came running up to the hedge at his call.

"A little word with you, mademoiselle, if it is permitted?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Poirot."

Despite her acquiescence, her eyes looked troubled and afraid.

"Mademoiselle, do you remember running after me on the road the day that I came to your house with the examining magistrate? You asked me if any one were suspected of the crime."

"And you told me two Chilians." Her voice sounded rather breathless, and her left hand stole to her breast.

"Will you ask me the same question again, mademoiselle?"

"What do you mean?"

"This. If you were to ask me that question again, I should give you a different answer. Some one is suspected—but not a Chilian."

"Who?" The word came faintly between her parted lips.

"M. Jack Renauld."

"What?" It was a cry. "Jack? Impossible. Who dares to suspect him?"

"Giraud."

"Giraud!" The girl's face was ashy. "I am afraid of that man. He is cruel. He will—he will—" She broke off. There was courage gathering in her face, and determination. I realized in that moment that she was a fighter. Poirot, too, watched her intently.

"You know, of course, that he was here on the night of the murder?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied mechanically. "He told me."

"It was unwise to have tried to conceal the fact," ventured Poirot.

"Yes, yes," she replied impatiently. "But we cannot waste time on regrets. We must find something to save him. He is innocent, of course, but that will not help him with a man like Giraud who has his reputation to think of. He must arrest some one, and that some one will be Jack."

"The facts will tell against him," said Poirot. "You realize that?"

She faced him squarely, and used the words I had heard her say in her mother's drawing-room.

"I am not a child, monsieur. I can be brave and look facts in the face. He is innocent, and we must save him."

She spoke with a kind of desperate energy, then was silent, frowning as she thought.

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot observing her keenly, "is there not something that you are keeping back that you could tell us?"

She nodded perplexedly.

"Yes, there is something, but I hardly know whether you will believe it—it seems so absurd."

"At any rate, tell us, mademoiselle."

"It is this. M. Giraud sent for me, as an afterthought, to see if I could identify the man in there." She signed with her head towards the shed. "I could not. At least I could not at the moment. But since I have been thinking—"

"Well?"

"It seems so queer, and yet I am almost sure. I will tell you. On the morning of the day M. Renauld was murdered, I was walking in the garden here, when I heard a sound of men's voices quarrelling. I pushed aside the bushes and looked through. One of the men was M. Renauld and the other was a tramp, a dreadful looking creature in filthy rags. He was alternately whining and threatening. I gathered he was asking for money, but at that moment *maman* called me from the house, and I had to go. That is all, only—I am almost sure that the tramp and the dead man in the shed are one and the same."

Poirot uttered an exclamation.

"But why did you not say so at the time, mademoiselle?"

"Because at first it only struck me that the face was vaguely familiar in some way. The man was differently dressed, and apparently belonged to a superior station in life. But tell me, Monsieur Poirot, is it not possible that this tramp might have attacked and killed M. Renauld, and taken his clothes and money?"

"It is an idea, mademoiselle," said Poirot slowly. "It leaves a lot unexplained, but it is certainly an idea. I will think of it."

A voice called from the house.

"Maman," whispered Marthe, "I must go." And she slipped away through the trees.

"Come," said Poirot, and taking my arm, turned in the direction of the Villa.

"What do you really think?" I asked, in some curiosity. "Was that story true, or did the girl make it up in order to divert suspicion from her lover?"

"It is a curious tale," said Poirot, "but I believe it to be the absolute truth. Unwittingly, Mademoiselle Marthe told us the truth on another point—and incidentally gave Jack Renauld the lie. Did you notice his hesitation when I asked him if he saw Marthe Daubreuil on the night of the crime? He paused and then said 'Yes.' I suspected that he was lying. It was necessary for me to see Mademoiselle Marthe before he could put her on her guard. Three little words gave me the information I wanted. When I asked her if she knew that Jack Renauld was here that night, she answered 'He *told* me.' Now, Hastings, what was Jack Renauld doing here on that eventful evening, and if he did not see Mademoiselle Marthe whom did he see?"

"Surely, Poirot," I cried, aghast, "you cannot believe that a boy like that would murder his own father."

"Mon ami," said Poirot, "you continue to be of a sentimentality unbelievable! I have seen mothers who murdered their little children for the sake of the insurance money! After that, one can believe anything."

"And the motive?"

"Money of course. Remember that Jack Renauld thought that he would come in to half his father's fortune at the latter's death."

"But the tramp. Where does he come in?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Giraud would say that he was an accomplice—an apache who helped young Renauld to commit the crime, and who was conveniently put out of the way afterwards."

"But the hair round the dagger? The woman's hair?"

"Ah," said Poirot, smiling broadly. "That is the cream of Giraud's little jest. According to him, it is not a woman's hair at all. Remember that the youths of today wear their hair brushed straight back from the forehead with pomade or hairwash to make it lie flat. Consequently some of the hairs are of considerable length."

"And you believe that too?"

"No," said Poirot with a curious smile. "For I know it to be the hair of a woman—and more, which woman!"

"Madame Daubreuil," I announced positively.

"Perhaps," said Poirot, regarding me quizzically.

But I refused to allow myself to get annoyed.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked, as we entered the hall of the Villa Geneviève.

"I wish to make a search amongst the effects of M. Jack Renauld. That is why I had to get him out of the way for a few hours."

"But will not Giraud have searched already?" I asked doubtfully.

"Of course. He builds a case, as a beaver builds a dam, with a fatiguing industry. But he will not have looked for the things that I am seeking—in all probability he would not have seen their importance if they stared him in the face. Let us begin."

Neatly and methodically, Poirot opened each drawer in turn, examined the contents, and returned them exactly to their places. It was a singularly dull and uninteresting proceeding. Poirot waded on through collars, pajamas and socks. A purring noise outside drew me to the window. Instantly I became galvanized into life.

"Poirot!" I cried. "A car has just driven up. Giraud is in it, and Jack Renauld, and two gendarmes."

"Sacré tonnerre!" growled Poirot. "That animal of a Giraud, could he not wait? I shall not be able to replace the things in this last drawer with the proper method. Let us be quick."

Unceremoniously he tumbled out the things on the floor, mostly ties and handkerchiefs. Suddenly with a cry of triumph Poirot pounced on something, a small square cardboard, evidently a photograph. Thrusting it into his pocket, he returned the things pell-mell to the drawer, and seizing me by the arm dragged me out of the room and down the stairs. In the hall stood Giraud, contemplating his prisoner.

"Good afternoon, M. Giraud," said Poirot. "What have we here?"

Giraud nodded his head towards Jack.

"He was trying to make a getaway, but I was too sharp for him. He is under arrest for the murder of his father, M. Paul Renauld."

Poirot wheeled to confront the boy who leaned limply against the door, his face ashy pale.

"What do you say to that, *jeune homme?"*

Jack Renauld stared at him stonily.

"Nothing," he said.

CHAPTER XIX

I USE MY GREY CELLS

I WAS dumbfounded. Up to the last, I had not been able to bring myself to believe Jack Renauld guilty. I had expected a ringing proclamation of his innocence when Poirot challenged him. But now, watching him as he stood, white and limp against the wall, and hearing the damning admission fall from his lips, I doubted no longer.

But Poirot had turned to Giraud.

"What are your grounds for arresting him?"

"Do you expect me to give them to you?"

"As a matter of courtesy, yes."

Giraud looked at him doubtfully. He was torn between a desire to refuse rudely and the pleasure of triumphing over his adversary.

"You think I have made a mistake, I suppose?" he sneered.

"It would not surprise me," replied Poirot, with a soupçon of malice.

Giraud's face took on a deeper tinge of red.

"Eh bien, come in here. You shall judge for yourself." He flung open the door of the *salon,* and we passed in, leaving Jack Renauld in the care of the two other men.

"Now, M. Poirot," said Giraud laying his hat on the table, and speaking with the utmost sarcasm, "I will treat you to a little lecture on detective work. I will show you how we moderns work."

"Bien!" said Poirot, composing himself to listen. "I will show you how admirably the Old Guard can listen," and he leaned back and closed his eyes, opening them for a moment to remark. "Do not fear that I shall sleep. I will attend most carefully."

"Of course," began Giraud, "I soon saw through all that Chilian tomfoolery. Two men were in it—but they were not mysterious foreigners! All that was a blind."

"Very creditable so far, my dear Giraud," murmured Poirot. "Especially after that clever trick of theirs with the match and cigarette end."

Giraud glared, but continued:

"A man must have been connected with the case, in order to dig the grave. There is no man who actually benefits by the crime, but there was a man who thought he would benefit. I heard of Jack Renauld's quarrel with his father, and of the threats that he had used. The motive was established.

Now as to means. Jack Renauld was in Merlinville that night. He concealed the fact—which turned suspicion into certainty. Then we found a second victim—*stabbed with the same dagger.* We know when that dagger was stolen. Captain Hastings here can fix the time. Jack Renauld, arriving from Cherbourg, was the only person who could have taken it. I have accounted for all the other members of the household."

Poirot interrupted:

"You are wrong. There is one other person who could have taken the dagger?"

"You refer to M. Stonor? He arrived at the front door, in an automobile which had brought him straight from Calais. Ah, believe me, I have looked into everything. M. Jack Renauld arrived by train. An hour elapsed between his arrival, and the moment he presented himself at the house. Without doubt, he saw Captain Hastings and his companion leave the shed, slipped in himself and took the dagger, stabbed his accomplice in the shed—"

"Who was already dead!"

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly he did not observe that. He may have judged him to be sleeping. Without doubt they had a rendezvous. In any case he knew this apparent second murder would greatly complicate the case. It did."

"But it could not deceive M. Giraud," murmured Poirot.

"You mock yourself at me. But I will give you one last irrefutable proof. Madame Renauld's story was false—a fabrication from beginning to end. We believe Madame Renauld to have loved her husband—*yet she lied to shield his murderer.* For whom will a woman lie? Sometimes for herself, usually for the man she loves, *always* for her children. That is the last—the irrefutable proof. You can not get round it."

Giraud paused, flushed and triumphant. Poirot regarded him steadily.

"That is my case," said Giraud. "What have you to say to it?"

"Only that there is one thing you have failed to take into account."

"What is that?"

"Jack Renauld was presumably acquainted with the planning out of the golf course. He knew that the body would be discovered almost at once, when they started to dig the bunker."

Giraud laughed out loud.

"But it is idiotic what you say there! He wanted the body to be found! Until it was found, he could not presume death, and would have been unable to enter into his inheritance."

I saw a quick flash of green in Poirot's eyes as he rose to his feet.

"Then why bury it?" he asked softly. "Reflect, Giraud. Since it was to

Jack Renauld's advantage that the body should be found without delay, *why dig a grave at all?"*

Giraud did not reply. The question found him unprepared. He shrugged his shoulders as though to intimate that it was of no importance.

Poirot moved towards the door. I followed him.

"There is one more thing that you have failed to take into account," he said over his shoulder.

"What is that?"

"The piece of lead piping," said Poirot, and left the room.

Jack Renauld still stood in the hall, with a white dumb face, but as we came out of the *salon,* he looked up sharply. At the same moment there was the sound of a footfall on the staircase. Mrs. Renauld was descending it. At the sight of her son, standing between the two myrmidons of the law, she stopped as though petrified.

"Jack," she faltered. "Jack, what is this?"

He looked up at her, his face set.

"They have arrested me, mother."

"What?"

She uttered a piercing cry, and before any one could get to her swayed and fell heavily. We both ran to her and lifted her up. In a minute Poirot stood up again.

"She has cut her head badly, on the corner of the stairs. I fancy there is slight concussion also. If Giraud wants a statement from her, he will have to wait. She will probably be unconscious for at least a week."

Denise and Françoise run to their mistress, and leaving her in their charge Poirot left the house. He walked with his head bent down, frowning thoughtfully at the ground. For some time I did not speak, but at last I ventured to put a question to him.

"Do you believe then, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, that Jack Renauld may not be guilty?"

Poirot did not answer at once, but after a long wait he said gravely:

"I do not know, Hastings. There is just a chance of it. Of course Giraud is all wrong—wrong from beginning to end. If Jack Renauld is guilty, it is in spite of Giraud's arguments, not *because* of them. And the gravest indictment against him is known only to me."

"What is that?" I asked, impressed.

"If you would use your grey cells, and see the whole case clearly as I do, you too would perceive it, my friend."

This was what I called one of Poirot's irritating answers. He went on, without waiting for me to speak.

"Let us walk this way to the sea. We will sit on that little mound there, overlooking the beach, and review the case. You shall know all that I know, but I would prefer that you should come at the truth by your own efforts—not by my leading you by the hand."

We established ourselves on the grassy knoll as Poirot had suggested, looking out to sea. From farther along the sand, the cries of the bathers reached us faintly. The sea was of the palest blue, and the halcyon calm reminded me of the day we had arrived at Merlinville, my own good spirits, and Poirot's suggestion that I was "fey." What a long time seemed to have elapsed since then. And in reality it was only three days!

"Think, my friend," said Poirot's voice encouragingly. "Arrange your ideas. Be methodical. Be orderly. There is the secret of success."

I endeavoured to obey him, casting my mind back over all the details of the case. And reluctantly it seemed to me that the only clear and possible solution was that of Giraud—which Poirot despised. I reflected anew. If there was daylight anywhere it was in the direction of Madame Daubreuil. Giraud was ignorant of her connection with the Beroldy Case. Poirot had declared the Beroldy Case to be all important. It was there I must seek. I was on the right track now. And suddenly I started as an idea of bewildering luminosity shot into my brain. Trembling I built up my hypothesis.

"You have a little idea, I see, *mon ami!* Capital. We progress."

I sat up, and lit a pipe.

"Poirot," I said, "it seems to me we have been strangely remiss. I say *we* —although I dare say *I* would be nearer the mark. But you must pay the penalty of your determined secrecy. So I say again we have been strangely remiss. There is some one we have forgotten."

"And who is that?" inquired Poirot, with twinkling eyes.

"Georges Conneau!"

CHAPTER XX

AN AMAZING STATEMENT

THE NEXT moment Poirot embraced me warmly. *"Enfin!* You have arrived. And all by yourself. It is superb! Continue your reasoning. You are right. Decidedly we have done wrong to forget Georges Conneau."

I was so flattered by the little man's approval that I could hardly continue. But at last I collected my thoughts and went on.

"Georges Conneau disappeared twenty years ago, but we have no reason to believe that he is dead."

"Aucunement," agreed Poirot. "Proceed."

"Therefore we will assume that he is alive."

"Exactly."

"Or that he was alive until recently."

"De mieux en mieux!"

"We will presume," I continued, my enthusiasm rising, "that he has fallen on evil days. He has become a criminal, an apache, a tramp—a what you will. He chances to come to Merlinville. There he finds the woman he has never ceased to love."

"Eh eh! The sentimentality," warned Poirot.

"Where one hates one also loves," I quoted or misquoted. "At any rate he finds her there, living under an assumed name. But she has a new lover, the Englishman, Renauld. Georges Conneau, the memory of old wrongs rising in him, quarrels with this Renauld. He lies in wait for him as he comes to visit his mistress, and stabs him in the back. Then, terrified at what he has done, he starts to dig a grave. I imagine it likely that Madame Daubreuil comes out to look for her lover. She and Conneau have a terrible scene. He drags her into the shed, and there suddenly falls down in an epileptic fit. Now supposing Jack Renauld to appear. Madame Daubreuil tells him all, points out to him the dreadful consequences to her daughter if this scandal of the past is revived. His father's murderer is dead—let them do their best to hush it up. Jack Renauld consents—goes to the house and has an interview with his mother, winning her over to his point of view. Primed with the story that Madame Daubreuil has suggested to him, she permits herself to be gagged and bound. There, Poirot, what do you think of that?" I leaned back, flushed with the pride of successful reconstruction.

Poirot looked at me thoughtfully.

"I think that you should write for the Kinema, *mon ami,*" he remarked at last.

"You mean—?"

"It would make a good film, the story that you have recounted to me there—but it bears no sort of resemblance to everyday life."

"I admit that I haven't gone into all the details, but—"

"You have gone further—you have ignored them magnificently. What about the way the two men were dressed? Do you suggest that after stabbing his victim, Conneau removed his suit of clothes, donned it himself, and replaced the dagger?"

"I don't see that that matters," I objected rather huffily. "He may have obtained clothes and money from Madame Daubreuil by threats earlier in the day."

"By threats—eh? You seriously advance that supposition?"

"Certainly. He could have threatened to reveal her identity to the Renauld's, which would probably have put an end to all hopes of her daughter's marriage."

"You are wrong, Hastings. He could not blackmail her, for she had the whip hand. Georges Conneau, remember, is still wanted for murder. A word from her and he is in danger of the guillotine."

I was forced, rather reluctantly, to admit the truth of this.

"Your theory," I remarked acidly, "is doubtless correct as to all the details?"

"My theory is the truth," said Poirot quietly. "And the truth is necessarily correct. In your theory you made a fundamental error. You permitted your imagination to lead you astray with midnight assignations and passionate love scenes. But in investigating crime we must take our stand upon the commonplace. Shall I demonstrate my methods to you?"

"Oh, by all means let us have a demonstration!"

Poirot sat very upright and began, wagging his forefinger emphatically to emphasize his points.

"I will start as you started from the basic fact of Georges Conneau. Now the story told by Madame Beroldy in court as to the 'Russians' was admittedly a fabrication. If she was innocent of connivance in the crime, it was concocted by her, and by her only as she stated. If, on the other hand, she was *not* innocent, it might have been invented by either her or Georges Conneau.

"Now in this case we are investigating, we meet the same tale. As I pointed out to you, the facts render it very unlikely that Madame Daubreuil inspired it. So we turn to the hypothesis that the story had its origin in the brain of Georges Conneau. Very good. Georges Conneau, therefore, planned the crime with Madame Renauld as his accomplice. She is in the limelight, and behind her is a shadowy figure whose *alias* is unknown to us.

"Now let us go carefully over the Renauld Case from the beginning, setting down each significant point in its chronological order. You have a notebook and pencil? Good. Now what is the earliest point to note down?"

"The letter to you?"

"That was the first we knew of it, but it is not the proper beginning of the case. The first point of any significance, I should say, is the change that came over M. Renauld shortly after arriving in Merlinville, and which is attested to by several witnesses. We have also to consider his friendship with Madame Daubreuil, and the large sums of money paid over to her. From thence we can come directly to the 23rd May."

Poirot paused, cleared his throat, and signed to me to write.

"*23rd May.* M. Renauld quarrels with his son over latter's wish to marry Marthe Daubreuil. Son leaves for Paris.

"*24th May.* M. Renauld alters his will, leaving entire control of his fortune in his wife's hands.

"*June 7th.* Quarrel with tramp in garden, witnessed by Marthe Daubreuil.

"Letter written to M. Hercule Poirot, imploring assistance.

"Telegram sent to Jack Renauld, bidding him proceed by the *Anzora* to Buenos Ayres.

"Chauffeur, Masters, sent off on a holiday.

"Visit of a lady, that evening. As he is seeing her out, his words are 'Yes, yes—but for God's sake go now. . . .' "

Poirot paused.

"There, Hastings, take each of those facts one by one, consider them carefully by themselves and in relation to the whole, and see if you do not get new light on the matter."

I endeavoured conscientiously to do as he had said. After a moment or two, I said rather doubtfully.

"As to the first points, the question seems to be whether we adopt the theory of blackmail, or of an infatuation for this woman."

"Blackmail, decidedly. You heard what Stonor said as to his character and habits."

"Mrs. Renauld did not confirm his view," I argued.

"We have already seen that Madame Renauld's testimony cannot be relied upon in any way. We must trust to Stonor on that point."

"Still, if Renauld had an affair with a woman called Bella, there seems no inherent improbability in his having another with Madame Daubreuil."

"None whatever, I grant you, Hastings. But did he?"

"The letter, Poirot. You forget the letter."

"No, I do not forget. But what makes you think that the letter was written to M. Renauld?"

"Why it was found in his pocket and—and—"

"And that is all!" cut in Poirot. "There was no mention of any name to show to whom the letter was addressed. We assumed it was to the dead man because it was in the pocket of his overcoat. Now, *mon ami,* something about that overcoat struck me as unusual. I measured it, and made the remark that he wore his overcoat very long. That remark should have given you to think."

"I thought you were just saying it for the sake of saying something," I confessed.

"Ah, *quelle idée!* Later you observed me measuring the overcoat of M. Jack Renauld. *Eh bien,* M. Jack Renauld wears his overcoat very short. Put those two facts together with a third, namely that M. Jack Renauld flung out of the house in a hurry on his departure for Paris, and tell me what you make of it!"

"I see," I said slowly, as the meaning of Poirot's remarks bore in upon me. "That letter was written to Jack Renauld—not to his father. He caught up the wrong overcoat in his haste and agitation."

Poirot nodded.

"Precisément! We can return to this point later. For the moment let us content ourselves with accepting the letter as having nothing to do with M. Renauld *père,* and pass to the next chronological event."

"May 23rd," I read, "M. Renauld quarrels with his son over latter's wish to marry Marthe Daubreuil. Son leaves for Paris. I don't see anything much to remark upon there, and the altering of the will the following day seems straightforward enough. It was the direct result of the quarrel."

"We agree, *mon ami*—at least as to the cause. But what exact motive underlay this procedure of M. Renauld's?"

I opened my eyes in surprise.

"Anger against his son of course."

"Yet he wrote him affectionate letters to Paris?"

"So Jack Renauld says, but he cannot produce them."

"Well, let us pass from that."

"Now we come to the day of the tragedy. You have placed the events of the morning in a certain order. Have you any justification for that?"

"I have ascertained that the letter to me was posted at the same time as the telegram was despatched. Masters was informed he could take a holiday shortly afterwards. In my opinion the quarrel with the tramp took place anterior to these happenings."

"I do not see that you can fix that definitely—unless you question Mademoiselle Daubreuil again."

"There is no need. I am sure of it. And if you do not see that, you see nothing, Hastings!"

I looked at him for a moment.

"Of course! I am an idiot. If the tramp was Georges Conneau, it was after the stormy interview with him that Mr. Renauld apprehended danger. He sent away the chauffeur, Masters, whom he suspected of being in the other's pay, he wired to his son, and sent for you."

A faint smile crossed Poirot's lips.

"You do not think it strange that he should use exactly the same expressions in his letter as Madame Renauld used later in her story? If the mention of Santiago was a blind, why should Renauld speak of it, and—what is more—send his son there?"

"It is puzzling, I admit, but perhaps we shall find some explanation later. We come now to the evening, and the visit of the mysterious lady. I confess that that fairly baffles me, unless it was Madame Daubreuil, as Françoise all along maintained."

Poirot shook his head.

"My friend, my friend, where are your wits wandering? Remember the fragment of cheque, and the fact that the name Bella Duveen was faintly familiar to Stonor, and I think we may take it for granted that Bella Duveen is the full name of Jack's unknown correspondent, and that it was she who came to the Villa Geneviève that night. Whether she intended to see Jack, or whether she meant all along to appeal to his father we cannot be certain, but I think we may assume that this is what occurred. She produced her claim upon Jack, probably showed letters that he had written to her, and the older man tried to buy her off by writing a cheque. This she indignantly tore up. The terms of her letter are those of a woman genuinely in love, and she would probably deeply resent being offered money. In the end he got rid of her, and here the words that he used are significant."

" 'Yes, yes, but for God's sake go now,' " I repeated. "They seem to me a little vehement, perhaps, that is all."

"That is enough. He was desperately anxious for the girl to go. Why? Not only because the interview was unpleasant. No, it was the time that was slipping by, and for some reason time was precious."

"Why should it be?" I asked, bewildered.

"That is what we ask ourselves. Why should it be? But later we have the incident of the wrist watch—which again shows us that time plays a very important part in the crime. We are now fast approaching the actual drama. It is half-past ten when Bella Duveen leaves, and by the evidence of the wrist watch we know that the crime was committed, or at any rate that it was staged, before twelve o'clock. We have reviewed all the events anterior to the murder, there remains only one unplaced. By the doctor's evidence, the tramp, when found, had been dead at least forty-eight hours—with a possible margin of twenty-four hours more. Now, with no other facts to help me than those we have discussed, I place the death as having occurred on the morning of June 7th."

I stared at him, stupefied.

"But how? Why? How can you possibly know?"

"Because only in that way can the sequence of events be logically explained. *Mon ami,* I have taken you step by step along the way. Do you not now see what is so glaringly plain?"

"My dear Poirot, I can't see anything glaring about it. I did think I was beginning to see my way before, but I'm now hopelessly fogged."

Poirot looked at me sadly, and shook his head.

"Mon Dieu! But it is *triste!* A good intelligence—and so deplorably lacking in method. There is an exercise most excellent for the development of the little grey cells. I will impart it to you—"

"For Heaven's sake, not now! You really are the most irritating of fellows, Poirot. For goodness' sake, get on and tell me who killed M. Renauld."

"That is just what I am not sure of as yet."

"But you said it was glaringly clear?"

"We talk at cross-purposes, my friend. Remember, it is *two* crimes we are investigating—for which, as I pointed out to you, we have the necessary two bodies. There, there, *ne vous impatientez pas!* I explain all. To begin with, we apply our psychology. We find three points at which M. Renauld displays a distinct change of view and action—three psychological points therefore. The first occurs immediately after arriving in Merlinville, the second after quarrelling with his son on a certain subject, the third on the morning of June 7th. Now for the three causes. We can attribute No. 1 to meeting Madame Daubreuil. No. 2 is indirectly connected with her since it concerns a marriage between M. Renauld's son and her daughter. But the cause of No. 3 is hidden from us. We have to deduce it. Now, *mon ami,* let me ask you a question; who do we believe to have planned this crime?"

"Georges Conneau," I said doubtfully, eyeing Poirot warily.

"Exactly. Now Giraud laid it down as an axiom that a woman lies to save herself, the man she loves, and her child. Since we are satisfied that it was Georges Conneau who dictated the lie to her, and as Georges Conneau is not Jack Renauld, follows that the third case is put out of court. And, still attributing the crime to Georges Conneau, the first is equally so. So we are forced to the second—that Madame Renauld lied for the sake of the man she loved—or in other words, for the sake of Georges Conneau. You agree to that."

"Yes," I admitted. "It seems logical enough."

"Bien! Madame Renauld loves Georges Conneau. Who, then, is Georges Conneau?"

"The tramp."

"Have we any evidence to show that Madame Renauld loved the tramp?"

"No, but—"

"Very well then. Do not cling to theories where facts no longer support them. Ask yourself instead who Madame Renauld *did* love."

I shook my head perplexed.

"Mais, oui, you know perfectly. Who did Madame Renauld love so dearly that when she saw his dead body, she fell down in a swoon?"

I stared dumbfounded.

"Her husband?" I gasped.

Poirot nodded.

"Her husband—or Georges Conneau, whichever you like to call him."

I rallied myself.

"But it's impossible."

"How 'impossible?' Did we not agree just now that Madame Daubreuil was in a position to blackmail Georges Conneau?"

"Yes, but—"

"And did she not very effectively blackmail M. Renauld?"

"That may be true enough, but—"

"And is it not a fact that we know nothing of M. Renauld's youth and upbringing? That he springs suddenly into existence as a French Canadian exactly twenty-two years ago?"

"All that is so," I said more firmly, "but you seem to me to be overlooking one salient point."

"What is it, my friend?"

"Why, we have admitted Georges Conneau planned the crime. That brings us to the ridiculous statement that he planned his own murder!"

"Eh bien, mon ami," said Poirot placidly, "that is just what he did do!"

CHAPTER XXI

HERCULE POIROT ON THE CASE

In a measured voice, Poirot began his exposition. "It seems strange to you, *mon ami,* that a man should plan his own death? So strange, that you prefer to reject the truth as fantastic, and to revert to a story that is in reality ten times more impossible. Yes, M. Renauld planned his own death, but there is one detail that perhaps escapes you—he did not intend to die."

I shook my head, bewildered.

"But no, it is all most simple really," said Poirot kindly. "For the crime that Mr. Renauld proposed a murderer was not necessary, as I told you, but a body was. Let us reconstruct, seeing events this time from a different angle.

"George Conneau flies from justice—to Canada. There, under an assumed name he marries, and finally acquires a vast fortune in South America. But there is a nostalgia upon him for his own country. Twenty years have elapsed, he is considerably changed in appearance, besides being a man of such eminence that no one is likely to connect him with a fugitive from justice many years ago. He deems it quite safe to return. He takes up his headquarters in England, but intends to spend the summers in France. And ill fortune, that obscure justice which shapes men's ends, and will not allow them to evade the consequences of their acts, takes him to Merlinville. There, in the whole of France, is the one person who is capable of recognizing him. It is, of course, a gold mine to Madame Daubreuil, and a gold mine of which she is not slow to take advantage. He is helpless, absolutely in her power. And she bleeds him heavily.

"And then the inevitable happens. Jack Renauld falls in love with the beautiful girl he sees almost daily, and wishes to marry her. That rouses his father. At all costs, he will prevent his son marrying the daughter of this evil woman. Jack Renauld knows nothing of his father's past, but Madame Renauld knows everything. She is a woman of great force of character, and passionately devoted to her husband. They take counsel together. Renauld sees only one way of escape—death. He must appear to die, in reality escaping to another country where he will start again under an assumed name, and where Madame Renauld, having played the widow's part for a while, can join him. It is essential that she should have control of the money, so he alters his will. How they meant to manage the body business originally, I do not know—possibly an art student's skeleton and a fire—or something of the kind, but long before their plans have matured an event occurs which plays into their hands. A rough tramp, violent and abusive, finds his way into the garden. There is a struggle, M. Renauld seeks to eject him, and suddenly the tramp, an epileptic, falls down in a fit. He is dead. M. Renauld calls his wife. Together they drag him into the shed—as we know, the event had occurred just outside—and they realize the marvellous opportunity that has been vouchsafed them. The man bears no resemblance to M. Renauld, but he is middle-aged, of a usual French type. That is sufficient.

"I rather fancy that they sat on the bench up there, out of earshot from the house, discussing matters. Their plan was quickly made. The identification must rest solely on Madame Renauld's evidence. Jack Renauld and the chauffeur (who had been with his master two years) must be got out of the way. It was unlikely that the French women servants would go near the body, and in any case Renauld intended to take measures to deceive any one not likely to appreciate details. Masters was sent off, a telegram despatched to Jack, Buenos Ayres being selected to give credence to the story that Renauld had decided upon. Having heard of me, as a rather obscure elderly detective, he wrote his appeal for help knowing that, when I arrived, the production of the letter would have a profound effect upon the examining magistrate—which, of course, it did.

"They dressed the body of the tramp in a suit of M. Renauld's and left his ragged coat and trousers by the door of the shed, not daring to take them into the house. And then, to give credence to the tale Madame Renauld was to tell, they drove the aeroplane dagger through his heart. That night, M. Renauld will first bind and gag his wife, and then, taking a spade, will dig a grave in that particular spot of ground where he knows a —how do you call it? bunkair?—is to be made. It is essential that the body should be found—Madame Daubreuil must have no suspicions. On the other hand, if a little time elapses, any dangers as to identity will be greatly lessened. Then, M. Renauld will don the tramp's rags, and shuffle off to the station, where he will leave, unnoticed, by the 12:10 train. Since the crime will be supposed to have taken place two hours later, no suspicion can possibly attach to him.

"You see now his annoyance at the inopportune visit of the girl Bella. Every moment of delay is fatal to his plans. He gets rid of her as soon as he can, however. Then, to work! He leaves the front door slightly ajar to create the impression that the assassins left that way. He binds and gags Madame Renauld, correcting his mistake of twenty-two years ago, when the looseness of the bonds caused suspicion to fall upon his accomplice, but leaving her primed with essentially the same story as he had invented before, proving the unconscious recoil of the mind against originality. The night is chilly, and he slips on an overcoat over his underclothing, intending to cast it into the grave with the dead man. He goes out by the window, smoothing over the flower bed carefully, and thereby furnishing the most positive evidence against himself. He goes out on to the lonely golf links, and he digs—and then—"

"Yes?"

"And then," said Poirot gravely, "the justice that he has so long eluded overtakes him. An unknown hand stabs him in the back. . . . Now, Hastings, you understand what I mean when I talk of *two* crimes. The first crime, the crime that M. Renauld, in his arrogance, asked us to investigate (ah, but he made a famous mistake there! He misjudged Hercule Poirot!) is solved. But behind it lies a deeper riddle. And to solve that will be difficult—since the criminal in his wisdom, has been content to avail himself of the devices prepared by M. Renauld. It has been a particularly perplexing and baffling mystery to solve. A young hand, like Giraud, who does not place any reliance on the psychology, is almost certain to fail."

"You're marvellous, Poirot," I said, with admiration. "Absolutely marvellous. No one on earth but you could have done it!"

I think my praise pleased him. For once in his life, he looked almost embarrassed.

"Ah, then you no longer despise poor old Papa Poirot? You shift your allegiance back from the human foxhound?"

His term for Giraud never failed to make me smile.

"Rather. You've scored over him handsomely."

"That poor Giraud," said Poirot, trying unsuccessfully to look modest. "Without doubt it is not all stupidity. He has had *la mauvaise chance* once or twice. That dark hair coiled round the dagger, for instance. To say the least, it was misleading."

"To tell you the truth, Poirot," I said slowly, "even now I don't quite see—whose hair was it?"

"Madame Renauld's of course. That is where *la mauvaise chance* came in. Her hair, dark originally, is almost completely silvered. It might just as easily have been a grey hair—and then, by no conceivable effort could Giraud have persuaded himself it came from the head of Jack Renauld! But it is all of a piece. Always the facts must be twisted to fit the theory! Did not Giraud find the traces of two persons, a man and a woman, in the shed? And how does that fit in with his reconstruction of the case? I will tell you—it does not fit in, and so we shall hear no more of them! I ask you, is that a methodical way of working? The great Giraud! The great

Giraud is nothing but a toy balloon—swollen with its own importance. But I, Hercule Poirot, whom he despises, will be the little pin that pricks the big balloon—*comme ça!*" And he made an expressive gesture. Then, calming down, he resumed:

"Without doubt, when Madame Renauld recovers, she will speak. The possibility of her son being accused of the murder never occurred to her. How should it, when she believed him safely at sea on board the *Anzora? Ah! voilà une femme,* Hastings! What force, what self-command! She only made one slip. On his unexpected return: 'It does not matter—*now'.* And no one noticed—no one realized the significance of those words. What a terrible part she has had to play, poor woman. Imagine the shock when she goes to identify the body and, instead of what she expects, sees the actual lifeless form of the husband she has believed miles away by now. No wonder she fainted! But since then, despite her grief and her despair, how resolutely she has played her part, and how the anguish of it must wring her. She cannot say a word to set us on the track of the real murderers. For her son's sake, no one must know that Paul Renauld was Georges Conneau, the criminal. Final and most bitter blow, she has admitted publicly that Madame Daubreuil was her husband's mistress—for a hint of blackmail might be fatal to her secret. How cleverly she dealt with the examining magistrate when he asked her if there was any mystery in her husband's past life. 'Nothing so romantic, I am sure, M. le juge.' It was perfect, the indulgent tone, the *soupçon* of sad mockery. At once M. Hautet felt himself foolish and melodramatic. Yes, she is a great woman! If she loved a criminal, she loved him royally!"

Poirot lost himself in contemplation.

"One thing more, Poirot, what about the piece of lead piping?"

"You do not see? To disfigure the victim's face so that it would be unrecognizable. It was that which first set me on the right track. And that imbecile of a Giraud, swarming all over it to look for match ends! Did I not tell you that a clue of two feet long was quite as good as a clue of two inches?"

"Well, Giraud will sing small now," I observed hastily, to lead the conversation away from my own shortcomings.

"As I said before, will he? If he has arrived at the right person by the wrong method, he will not permit that to worry him."

"But surely—" I paused as I saw the new trend of things.

"You see, Hastings, we must now start again. Who killed M. Renauld? Some one who was near the Villa just before twelve o'clock that night, some one who would benefit by his death—the description fits Jack Renauld only too well. The crime need not have been premeditated. And then the dagger!"

I started, I had not realized that point.

"Of course," I said. "The second dagger we found in the tramp was Mrs. Renauld's. There *were* two, then."

"Certainly, and, since they were duplicates, it stands to reason that Jack Renauld was the owner. But that would not trouble me so much. In fact I have a little idea as to that. No, the worst indictment against him is again psychological—heredity, *mon ami,* heredity! Like father, like son—Jack Renauld, when all is said or done, is the son of Georges Conneau."

His tone was grave and earnest, and I was impressed in spite of myself.

"What is your little idea that you mentioned just now?" I asked.

For answer, Poirot consulted his turnip-faced watch, and then asked:

"What time is the afternoon boat from Calais?"

"About five, I believe."

"That will do very well. We shall just have time."

"You are going to England?"

"Yes, my friend."

"Why?"

"To find a possible—witness."

"Who?"

With a rather peculiar smile upon his face, Poirot replied:

"Miss Bella Duveen."

"But how will you find her—what do you know about her?"

"I know nothing about her—but I can guess a good deal. We may take it for granted that her name *is* Bella Duveen, and since that name was faintly familiar to M. Stonor, though evidently not in connection with the Renauld family, it is probable that she is on the stage. Jack Renauld was a young man with plenty of money, and twenty years of age. The stage is sure to have been the home of his first love. It tallies, too, with M. Renauld's attempt to placate her with a cheque. I think I shall find her all right—especially with the help of *this.*"

And he brought out the photograph I had seen him take from Jack Renauld's drawer. "With love from Bella" was scrawled across the corner, but it was not that which held my eyes fascinated. The likeness was not first rate—but for all that it was unmistakable to me. I felt a cold sinking, as though some unutterable calamity had befallen me.

It was the face of Cinderella.

CHAPTER XXII

I FIND LOVE

FOR a moment or two I sat as though frozen, the photograph still in my hand. Then, summoning all my courage to appear unmoved, I handed it back. At the same time, I stole a quick glance at Poirot. Had he noticed anything? But to my relief he did not seem to be observing me. Anything unusual in my manner had certainly escaped him.

He rose briskly to his feet.

"We have no time to lose. We must make our departure with all despatch. All is well—the sea it will be calm!"

In the bustle of departure, I had no time for thinking, but once on board the boat, secure from Poirot's observation (he, as usual, was "practising the method most excellent of Laverguier") I pulled myself together, and attacked the facts dispassionately. How much did Poirot know? Was he aware that my acquaintance of the train and Bella Duveen were one and the same? Why had he gone to the Hôtel du Phare? On my behalf as I had believed? Or had I only fatuously thought so, and was this visit undertaken with a deeper and more sinister purpose?

But in any case, why was he bent on finding this girl? Did he suspect her of having seen Jack Renauld commit the crime? Or did he suspect—but that was impossible! The girl had no grudge against the elder Renauld, no possible motive for wishing his death. What had brought her back to the scene of the murder? I went over the facts carefully. She must have left the train at Calais where I parted from her that day. No wonder I had been unable to find her on the boat. If she had dined in Calais, and then taken a train out to Merlinville, she would have arrived at the Villa Geneviève just about the time that Françoise said. What had she done when she left the house just after ten? Presumably either gone to an hotel, or returned to Calais. And then? The crime had been committed on Tuesday night. On Thursday morning, she was once more in Merlinville. Had she ever left France at all? I doubted it very much. What kept her there—the hope of seeing Jack Renauld? I had told her (as at the time we believed) that he was on the high seas *en route* to Buenos Ayres. Possibly she was aware that the *Anzora* had not sailed. But to know that she must have seen Jack. Was that what Poirot was after? Had Jack Renauld, returning to see Marthe

Daubreuil, come face to face instead with Bella Duveen, the girl he had heartlessly thrown over?

I began to see daylight. If that were indeed the case, it might furnish Jack with the alibi he needed. Yet under those circumstances his silence seemed difficult to explain. Why could he not have spoken out boldly? Did he fear for this former entanglement of his to come to the ears of Marthe Daubreuil? I shook my head, dissatisfied. The thing had been harmless enough, a foolish boy and girl affair, and I reflected cynically that the son of a millionaire was not likely to be thrown over by a penniless French girl, who moreover loved him devotedly, without a much graver cause.

Altogether I found the affair puzzling and unsatisfactory. I disliked intensely being associated with Poirot in hunting this girl down, but I could not see any way of avoiding it, without revealing everything to him, and this, for some reason, I was loath to do.

Poirot reappeared brisk and smiling at Dover, and our journey to London was uneventful. It was past nine o'clock when he arrived, and I supposed that we should return straight away to our rooms and do nothing till the morning. But Poirot had other plans.

"We must lose no time, *mon ami*. The news of the arrest will not be in the English papers until the day after tomorrow, but still we must lose no time."

I did not quite follow his reasoning, but I merely asked how he proposed to find the girl.

"You remember Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent? No? I assisted him in a little matter of a Japanese wrestler. A pretty little problem, I must recount it to you one day. He, without doubt, will be able to put us in the way of finding out what we want to know."

It took us some time to run Mr. Aarons to earth, and it was after midnight when we finally managed it. He greeted Poirot with every evidence of warmth, and professed himself ready to be of service to us in any way.

"There's not much about the profession I don't know," he said, beaming genially.

"Eh bien, M. Aarons, I desire to find a young girl called Bella Duveen."

"Bella Duveen. I know the name, but for the moment I can't place it. What's her line?"

"That I do not know—but here is her photograph."

Mr. Aarons studied it for a moment, then his face lighted.

"Got it!" He slapped his thigh. "The Dulcibella Kids, by the Lord!"

"The Dulcibella Kids?"

"That's it. They're sisters. Acrobats, dancers and singers. Give quite a good little turn. They're in the provinces somewhere, I believe—if they're not resting. They've been on in Paris for the last two or three weeks."

"Can you find out for me exactly where they are?"

"Easy as a bird. You go home, and I'll send you round the dope in the morning."

With this promise we took leave of him. He was as good as his word. About eleven o'clock the following day, a scribbled note reached us.

"The Dulcibella Sisters are on at the Palace in Coventry. Good luck to you."

Without more ado, we started for Coventry. Poirot made no inquiries at the theatre, but contented himself with booking stalls for the variety performance that evening.

The show was wearisome beyond words—or perhaps it was only my mood that made it seem so. Japanese families balanced themselves precariously, would-be fashionable men, in greenish evening dress and exquisitely slicked hair, reeled off society patter and danced marvellously, stout prima donnas sang at the top of the human register, a comic comedian endeavoured to be Mr. George Robey and failed signally.

At last the number went up which announced the Dulcibella Kids. My heart beat sickeningly. There she was—there they both were, the pair of them, one flaxen haired, one dark, matching as to size, with short fluffy skirts and immense buster brown bows. They looked a pair of extremely piquant children. They began to sing. Their voices were fresh and true, rather thin and music-hally, but attractive.

It was quite a pretty little turn. They danced neatly, and did some clever little acrobatic feats. The words of their songs were crisp and catchy. When the curtain fell, there was a full meed of applause. Evidently the Dulcibella Kids were a success.

Suddenly I felt that I could remain no longer. I must get out into the air. I suggested leaving to Poirot.

"Go by all means, *mon ami.* I amuse myself, and will stay to the end. I will rejoin you later."

It was only a few steps from the theatre to the hotel. I went up to the sitting-room, ordered a whisky and soda, and sat drinking it, staring meditatively into the empty grate. I heard the door open, and turned my head, thinking it was Poirot. Then I jumped to my feet. It was Cinderella who stood in the doorway. She spoke haltingly, her breath coming in little gasps.

"I saw you in front. You and your friend. When you got up to go, I was waiting outside and followed you. Why are you here—in Coventry? What were you doing there to-night? Is the man who was with you the—the detective?"

She stood there, the cloak she had wrapped round her stage dress slipping from her shoulders. I saw the whiteness of her cheeks under the rouge, and heard the terror in her voice. And in that moment I understood everything—understood why Poirot was seeking her, and what she feared, and understood at last my own heart. . . .

"Yes," I said gently.

"Is he looking for—me?" she half whispered.

Then, as I did not answer for a moment, she slipped down by the big chair, and burst into violent, bitter weeping.

I knelt down by her, holding her in my arms, and smoothing the hair back from her face.

"Don't cry, child, don't cry, for God's sake. You're safe here. I'll take care of you. Don't cry, darling. Don't cry. I know—I know everything."

"Oh, but you don't!"

"I think I do." And after a moment, as her sobs grew quieter, I asked: "It was you who took the dagger, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"That was why you wanted me to show you round? And why you pretended to faint?"

Again she nodded. It was a strange thought to come to me at the moment, but it shot into my mind that I was glad her motive was what it had been—rather than the idle and morbid curiosity I had accused her of at the time. How gallantly she had played her part that day, inwardly racked with fear and trepidation as she must have been. Poor little soul, bearing the burden of a moment's impetuous action.

"Why did you take the dagger?" I asked presently.

She replied as simply as a child:

"I was afraid there might be finger-marks on it."

"But didn't you remember that you had worn gloves?"

She shook her head as though bewildered, and then said slowly:

"Are you going to give me up to—to the Police?"

"Good God! no."

Her eyes sought mine long and earnestly, and then she asked in a little quiet voice that sounded afraid of itself:

"Why not?"

It seemed a strange place and a strange time for a declaration of love—and God knows, in all my imagining, I had never pictured love coming to me in such a guise. But I answered simply and naturally enough:

"Because I love you, Cinderella."

She bent her head down, as though ashamed, and muttered in a broken voice:

"You can't—you can't—not if you knew—" And then, as though rallying herself, she faced me squarely, and asked:

"What do you know, then?"

"I know that you came to see Mr. Renauld that night. He offered you a cheque and you tore it up indignantly. Then you left the house—" I paused.

"Go on—what next?"

"I don't know whether you knew that Jack Renauld would be coming that night, or whether you just waited about on the chance of seeing him, but you did wait about. Perhaps you were just miserable, and walked aimlessly—but at any rate just before twelve you were still near there, and you saw a man on the golf links—"

"Again I paused. I had leapt to the truth in a flash as she entered the room, but now the picture rose before me even more convincingly. I saw vividly the peculiar pattern of the overcoat on the dead body of Mr. Renauld, and I remembered the amazing likeness that had startled me into believing for one instant that the dead man had risen from the dead when his son burst into our conclave in the *salon*.

"Go on," repeated the girl steadily.

"I fancy his back was to you—but you recognized him, or thought you recognized him. The gait and the carriage were familiar to you, and the pattern of his overcoat." I paused. "You told me in the train on the way from Paris that you had Italian blood in your veins, and that you had nearly got into trouble once with it. You used a threat in one of your letters to Jack Renauld. When you saw him there, your anger and jealously drove you mad—and you struck! I don't believe for a minute that you meant to kill him. But you did kill him, Cinderella."

She had flung up her hands to cover her face, and in a chocked voice she said:

"You're right . . . you're right . . . I can see it all as you tell it." Then she turned on me almost savagely. "And you love me? Knowing what you do, how can you love me?"

"I don't know," I said a little wearily. "I think love is like that—a thing one cannot help. I have tried, I know—ever since the first day I met you. And love has been too strong for me."

And then suddenly, when I least expected it, she broke down again, casting herself down on the floor and sobbing wildly.

"Oh, I can't!" she cried. "I don't know what to do. I don't know which way to turn. Oh, pity me, pity me, some one, and tell me what to do!"

Again I knelt by her, soothing her as best I could.

"Don't be afraid of me, Bella. For God's sake don't be afraid of me. I love you, that's true—but I don't want anything in return. Only let me help you. Love him still if you have to, but let me help you as he can't."

It was as though she had been turned to stone by my words. She raised her head from her hands and stared at me.

"You think that?" she whispered. "You think that I love Jack Renauld?"

Then, half laughing, half crying, she flung her arms passionately round my neck, and pressed her sweet wet face to mine.

"Not as I love you," she whispered. "Never as I love you!"

Her lips brushed my cheek, and then, seeking my mouth, kissed me again and again with a sweetness and fire beyond belief. The wildness of it—and the wonder, I shall not forget—no, not as long as I live!

It was a sound in the doorway that made us look up. Poirot was standing there looking at us.

I did not hesitate. With a bound I reached him and pinioned his arms to his sides.

"Quick," I said to the girl. "Get out of here. As fast as you can. I'll hold him."

With one look at me, she fled out of the room past us. I held Poirot in a grip of iron.

"Mon ami," observed the latter mildly, "you do this sort of thing very well. The strong man holds me in his grasp and I am helpless as a child. But all this is uncomfortable and slightly ridiculous. Let us sit down and be calm."

"You won't pursue her?"

"Mon Dieu! no. Am I Giraud? Release me, my friend."

Keeping a suspicious eye upon him, for I paid Poirot the compliment of knowing that I was no match for him in astuteness, I relaxed my grip, and he sank into an arm-chair, feeling his arms tenderly.

"It is that you have the strength of a bull when you are roused, Hastings! *Eh bien,* and do you think you have behaved well to your old friend? I show you the girl's photograph and you recognize it, but you never say a word."

"There was no need if you knew that I recognized it," I said rather bitterly. So Poirot had known all along! I had not deceived him for an instant.

"Ta-ta! You did not know that I knew that. And tonight you help the girl to escape when we have found her with so much trouble! *Eh bien!* it comes to this—are you going to work with me or against me, Hastings?"

For a moment or two I did not answer. To break with my old friend gave me great pain. Yet I must definitely range myself against him. Would he ever forgive me, I wondered? He had been strangely calm so far, but I knew him to possess marvellous self-command.

"Poirot," I said, "I'm sorry. I admit I've behaved badly to you over this. But sometimes one has no choice. And in future I must take my own line."

Poirot nodded his head several times.

"I understand," he said. The mocking light had quite died out of his eyes, and he spoke with a sincerity and kindness that surprised me. "It is that, my friend, is it not? It is love that has come—not as you imagined it, all cock a hoop with fine feathers, but sadly, with bleeding feet. Well, well—I warned you. When I realized that this girl must have taken the dagger, I warned you. Perhaps you remember. But already it was too late. But, tell me, how much do you know?"

I met his eyes squarely.

"Nothing that you could tell me would be any surprise to me, Poirot. Understand that. But in case you think of resuming your search for Miss Duveen, I should like you to know one thing clearly. If you have any idea that she was concerned in the crime, or was the mysterious lady who called upon Mr. Renauld that night, you are wrong. I travelled home from France with her that day, and parted from her at Victoria that evening so that it is clearly impossible for her to have been in Merlinville."

"Ah!" Poirot looked at me thoughtfully. "And you would swear to that in a court of law?"

"Most certainly I would."

Poirot rose and bowed.

"Mon ami! Vive l'amour! It can perform miracles. It is decidedly ingenious what you have thought of there. It defeats even Hercule Poirot!"

CHAPTER XXIII

DIFFICULTIES AHEAD

AFTER A moment of stress, such as I have just described, reaction is bound to set in. I retired to rest that night on a note of triumph, but I awoke to realize that I was by no means out of the wood. True, I could see no flaw in the alibi I had so suddenly conceived. I had but to stick to my story, and I failed to see how Bella could be convicted in face of it. It was not as though there was any old friendship between us that could be raked up, and which might lead them to suspect that I was committing perjury. It could be proved that in actual fact I had only seen the girl on three occasions. No, I was still satisfied with my idea—had not even Poirot admitted that it defeated him?

But there I felt the need of treading warily. All very well for my little friend to admit himself momentarily nonplused. I had far too much respect for his abilities to conceive of him as being content to remain in that position. I had a very humble opinion of my wits when it came to matching them against his. Poirot would not take defeat lying down. Somehow or other, he would endeavour to turn the tables on me, and that in the way, and at the moment, when I least expected it.

We met at breakfast the following morning as though nothing had happened. Poirot's good temper was imperturbable, yet I thought I detected a film of reserve in his manner which was new. After breakfast, I announced my intention of going out for a stroll. A malicious gleam shot through Poirot's eyes.

"If it is information you seek, you need not be at the pains of deranging yourself. I can tell you all you wish to know. The Dulcibella Sisters have cancelled their contract, and have left Coventry for an unknown destination."

"Is that really so, Poirot?"

"You can take it from me, Hastings. I made inquires the first thing this morning. After all, what else did you expect?"

True enough, nothing else could be expected under the circumstances. Cinderella had profited by the slight start I had been able to assure her, and would certainly not lose a moment in removing herself from the reach of the pursuer. It was what I had intended and planned. Nevertheless, I was aware of being plunged into a network of fresh difficulties.

I had absolutely no means of communicating with the girl, and it was vital that she should know the line of defence that had occurred to me, and which I was prepared to carry out. Of course it was possible that she might try to send word to me in some way or another, but I hardly thought it likely. She would know the risk she ran of a message being intercepted by Poirot, thus setting him on her track once more. Clearly her only course was to disappear utterly for the time being.

But, in the meantime, what was Poirot doing? I studied him attentively. He was wearing his most innocent air, and staring meditatively into the far distance. He looked altogether too placid and supine to give me reassurance. I had learned, with Poirot, that the less dangerous he looked, the more dangerous he was. His quiescence alarmed me. Observing a troubled quality in my glance, he smiled benignantly.

"You are puzzled, Hastings? You ask yourself why I do not launch myself in pursuit?"

"Well—something of the kind."

"It is what you would do, were you in my place. I understand that. But I am not of those who enjoy rushing up and down a country seeking a needle in a haystack, as you English say. No—let Mademoiselle Bella Duveen go. Without doubt, I shall be able to find her when the time comes. Until then, I am content to wait."

I stared at him doubtfully. Was he seeking to mislead me? I had an irritating feeling that, even now, he was master of the situation. My sense of superiority was gradually waning. I had contrived the girl's escape, and evolved a brilliant scheme for saving her from the consequences of her rash act—but I could not rest easy in my mind. Poirot's perfect calm awakened a thousand apprehensions.

"I suppose, Poirot," I said rather diffidently, "I mustn't ask what your plans are? I've forfeited the right."

"But not at all. There is no secret about them. We return to France without delay."

"We?"

"Precisely—*'we!'* You know very well that you cannot afford to let Papa Poirot out of your sight. Eh, is it not so, my friend? But remain in England by all means if you wish—"

I shook my head. He had hit the nail on the head. I could not afford to let him out of my sight. Although I could not expect his confidence after what had happened, I could still check his actions. The only danger to Bella lay with him. Giraud and the French police were indifferent to her existence. At all costs I must keep near Poirot.

Poirot observed me attentively as these reflections passed through my mind, and gave a nod of satisfaction.

"I am right, am I not? And as you are quite capable of trying to follow me, disguised with some absurdity such as a false beard—which every one would perceive, *bien entendu*—I much prefer that we should voyage together. It would annoy me greatly that any one should mock themselves at you."

"Very well, then. But it's only fair to warn you—"

"I know—I know all. You are my enemy! Be my enemy then. It does not worry me at all."

"So long as it's all fair and above-board, I don't mind."

"You have to the full the English passion for 'fair play!' Now your scruples are satisfied, let us depart immediately. There is no time to be lost. Our stay in England has been short but sufficient. I know—what I wanted to know."

The tone was light, but I read a veiled menace into the words.

"Still—" I began, and stopped.

"Still—as you say! Without doubt you are satisfied with the part you are playing. Me, I preoccupy myself with Jack Renauld."

Jack Renauld! The words gave me a start. I had completely forgotten that aspect of the case. Jack Renauld, in prison, with the shadow of the guillotine looming over him! I saw the part I was playing in a more sinister light. I could save Bella—yes, but in doing so I ran the risk of sending an innocent man to his death.

I pushed the thought from me with horror. It could not be. He would be acquitted. Certainly he would be acquitted! But the cold fear came back. Suppose he were not? What then? Could I have it on my conscience—horrible thought! Would it come to that in the end? A decision. Bella or Jack Renauld? The promptings of my heart were to save the girl I loved at any cost to myself. But, if the cost were to another, the problem was altered.

What would the girl herself say? I remembered that no word of Jack Renauld's arrest had passed my lips. As yet she was in total ignorance of the fact that her former lover was in prison charged with a hideous crime which he had not committed. When she knew, how would she act? Would she permit her life to be saved at the expense of his? Certainly she must do nothing rash. Jack Renauld might, and probably would, be acquitted without any intervention on her part. If so, good. But if he was not. . . . That was the terrible, the unanswerable problem. I fancied that she ran no risk of the extreme penalty. The circumstances of the crime were quite different in her case. She could plead jealousy and extreme provocation, and her youth and beauty would go for much. The fact that by a tragic mistake it was old Mr. Renauld, and not his son, who paid the penalty would not alter the motive of the crime. But in any case, however lenient the sentence of the Court, it must mean a long term of imprisonment.

No, Bella must be protected. And, at the same time, Jack Renauld must be saved. How this was to be accomplished I did not see clearly. But I pinned my faith to Poirot. He *knew.* Come what might, he would manage to save an innocent man. He must find some pretext other than the real one. It might be difficult, but he would manage it somehow. And with Bella unsuspected, and Jack Renauld acquitted, all would end satisfactorily.

So I told myself repeatedly, but at the bottom of my heart there still remained a cold fear.

CHAPTER XXIV

"SAVE HIM!"

WE CROSSED from England by the evening boat, and the following morning saw us in Saint-Omer, whither Jack Renauld had been taken. Poirot lost no time in visiting M. Hautet. As he did not seem disposed to make any objections to my accompanying him, I bore him company.

After various formalities and preliminaries, we were conducted to the examining magistrate's room. He greeted us cordially.

"I was told that you had returned to England, M. Poirot. I am glad to find that such is not the case."

"It is true that I went there, M. le juge, but it was only for a flying visit. A side issue, but one that I fancied might repay investigation."

"And it did—eh?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. M. Hautet nodded, sighing.

"We must resign ourselves, I fear. That animal Giraud, his manners are abominable, but he is undoubtedly clever! Not much chance of that one making a mistake."

"You think not, M. le juge?"

It was the examining magistrate's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"*Eh bien,* speaking frankly—in confidence, *c'est entendu*—can you come to any other conclusion?"

"Frankly, M. le juge, there seem to me to be many points that are obscure."

"Such as—?"

But Poirot was not to be drawn.

"I have not yet tabulated them," he remarked. "It was a general reflection that I was making. I liked the young man, and should be sorry to believe him guilty of such a hideous crime. By the way, what has he to say for himself on the matter?"

The magistrate frowned.

"I cannot understand him. He seems incapable of putting up any sort of defence. It has been most difficult to get him to answer questions. He contents himself with a general denial, and beyond that takes refuge in a most obstinate silence. I am interrogating him again tomorrow; perhaps you would like to be present?"

We accepted the invitation with *empressement.*

"A distressing case," said the magistrate with a sigh. "My sympathy for Madame Renauld is profound."

"How is Madame Renauld?"

"She has not yet recovered consciousness. It is merciful in a way, poor woman, she is being spared much. The doctors say that there is no danger, but that when she comes to herself she must be kept as quiet as possible. It was, I understand, quite as much the shock as the fall which caused her present state. It would be terrible if her brain became unhinged; but I should not wonder at all—no, really, not at all."

M. Hautet leaned back, shaking his head, with a sort of mournful enjoyment, as he envisaged the gloomy prospect.

He roused himself at length, and observed with a start.

"That reminds me. I have here a letter for you, M. Poirot. Let me see, where did I put it?"

He proceeded to rummage amongst his papers. At last he found the missive, and handed it to Poirot.

"It was sent under cover to me in order that I might forward it to you," he explained. "But as you left no address I could not do so."

Poirot studied the letter curiously. It was addressed in a long, sloping, foreign hand, and the writing was decidedly a woman's. Poirot did not open it. Instead he put it in his pocket and rose to his feet.

"A demain then, M. le juge. Many thanks for your courtesy and amiability."

"But not at all. I am always at your service. These young detectives of the school of Giraud, they are all alike—rude, sneering fellows. They do not realize that an examining magistrate of my—er—experience is bound to have a certain discernment, a certain—*flair. Enfin!* the politeness of the old school is infinitely more to my taste. Therefore, my dear friend, command me in any way you will. We know a thing or two, you and I—eh?"

And laughing heartily, enchanted with himself and with us, M. Hautet bade us adieu. I am sorry to have to record that Poirot's first remark to me as we traversed the corridor was:

"A famous old imbecile, that one! Of a stupidity to make pity!"

We were just leaving the building when we came face to face with Giraud, looking more dandified than ever, and thoroughly pleased with himself.

"Aha! M. Poirot," he cried airily. "You have returned from England then?"

"As you see," said Poirot.

"The end of the case is not far off now, I fancy."

"I agree with you, M. Giraud."

Poirot spoke in a subdued tone. His crest-fallen manner seemed to delight the other.

"Of all the milk and water criminals! Not an idea of defending himself. It is extraordinary!"

"So extraordinary that it gives one to think, does it not?" suggested Poirot mildly.

But Giraud was not even listening. He twirled his cane amicably.

"Well, good day, M. Poirot. I am glad you're satisfied of young Renauld's guilt at last."

"Pardon! But I am not in the least satisfied. Jack Renauld is innocent."

Giraud stared for a moment—then burst out laughing, tapping his head significantly with the brief remark: *"Toqué!"*

Poirot drew himself up. A dangerous light showed in his eyes.

"M. Giraud, throughout the case your manner to me has been deliberately insulting! You need teaching a lesson. I am prepared to wager you 500 francs that I find the murderer of M. Renauld before you do. Is it agreed?"

Giraud stared helplessly at him, and murmured again:

"Toqué!"

"Come now," urged Poirot, "is it agreed?"

"I have no wish to take your money from you."

"Make your mind easy—you will not!"

"Oh, well then, I agree! You speak of my manner to you being insulting. *Eh bien,* once or twice, *your* manner has annoyed *me."*

"I am enchanted to hear it," said Poirot. "Good morning, M. Giraud. Come, Hastings."

I said no word as we walked along the street. My heart was heavy. Poirot had displayed his intentions only too plainly. I doubted more than ever my powers of saving Bella from the consequences of her act. This unlucky encounter with Giraud had roused Poirot and put him on his mettle.

Suddenly I felt a hand laid on my shoulder, and turned to face Gabriel Stonor. We stopped and greeted him, and he proposed strolling with us back to our hotel.

"And what are you doing here, M. Stonor?" inquired Poirot.

"One must stand by one's friends," replied the other dryly. "Especially when they are unjustly accused."

"Then you do not believe that Jack Renauld committed the crime?" I asked eagerly.

"Certainly I don't. I know the lad. I admit that there have been one or two things in this business that have staggered me completely, but none the less, in spite of his fool way of taking it, I'll never believe that Jack Renauld is a murderer."

My heart warmed to the secretary. His words seemed to lift a secret weight from my heart.

"I have no doubt that many people feel as you do," I exclaimed. "There is really absurdly little evidence against him. I should say that there was no doubt of his acquittal—no doubt whatever."

But Stonor hardly responded as I could have wished.

"I'd give a lot to think as you do," he said gravely. He turned to Poirot. "What's your opinion, monsieur?"

"I think that things look very black against him," said Poirot quietly.

"You believe him guilty?" said Stonor sharply.

"No. But I think he will find it hard to prove his innocence."

"He's behaving so damned queerly," muttered Stonor. "Of course I realize that there's a lot more in this affair than meets the eye. Giraud's not wise to that because he's an outsider, but the whole thing has been damned odd. As to that, least said soonest mended. If Mrs. Renauld wants to hush anything up, I'll take my cue from her. It's her show, and I've too much respect for her judgment to shove my oar in, but I can't get behind this attitude of Jack's. Any one would think he *wanted* to be thought guilty."

"But it's absurd," I cried, bursting in. "For one thing, the dagger—" I paused, uncertain as to how much Poirot would wish me to reveal. I continued, choosing my words carefully, "We know that the dagger could not have been in Jack Renauld's possession that evening. Mrs. Renauld knows that."

"True," said Stonor. "When she recovers, she will doubtless say all this and more. Well, I must be leaving you."

"One moment." Poirot's hand arrested his departure. "Can you arrange for word to be sent to me at once should Madame Renauld recover consciousness?"

"Certainly. That's easily done."

"That point about the dagger is good, Poirot," I urged as we went upstairs. "I couldn't speak very plainly before Stonor."

"That was quite right of you. We might as well keep the knowledge to ourselves as long as we can. As to the dagger, your point hardly helps Jack Renauld. You remember that I was absent for an hour this morning, before we started from London?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I was employed in trying to find the firm Jack Renauld employed to convert his souvenirs. It was not very difficult. *Eh bien,* Hastings, they made to his order not *two* paper-knives, but *three.*"

"So that—?"

"So that, after giving one to his mother, and one to Bella Duveen, there was a third which he doubtless retained for his own use. No, Hastings, I fear the dagger question will not help us to save him from the guillotine."

"It won't come to that," I cried, stung.

Poirot shook his head uncertainly.

"You will save him," I cried positively.

Poirot glanced at me dryly.

"Have you not rendered it impossible, *mon ami?"*

"Some other way," I muttered.

"Ah! *Sapristi!* But it is miracles you ask from me. No—say no more. Let us instead see what is in this letter."

And he drew out the envelope from his breast pocket.

His face contracted as he read, then he handed the one flimsy sheet to me.

"There are other women in the world who suffer, Hastings."

The writing was blurred and the note had evidently been written in great agitation:

"Dear M. Poirot:

"If you get this, I beg of you to come to my aid. I have no one to turn to, and at all costs Jack must be saved. I implore of you on my knees to help us.

"MARTHE DAUBREUIL."

I handed it back, moved.

"You will go?"

"At once. We will command an auto."

Half an hour later saw us at the Villa Marguerite. Marthe was at the door to meet us, and led Poirot in, clinging with both hands to one of his.

"Ah, you have come—it is good of you. I have been in despair, not knowing what to do. They will not let me go to see him in prison even. I suffer horribly, I am nearly mad. Is it true what they say, that he does not deny the crime? But that is madness. It is impossible that he should have done it! Never for one minute will I believe it."

"Neither do I believe it, mademoiselle," said Poirot gently.

"But then why does he not speak? I do not understand."

"Perhaps because he is screening some one," suggested Poirot, watching her.

Marthe frowned.

"Screening some one? Do you mean his mother? Ah, from the beginning I have suspected her. Who inherits all that vast fortune? She does. It is easy to wear widow's weeds and play the hypocrite. And they say that when he was arrested she fell down—like *that.*" She made a dramatic gesture. "And without doubt, M. Stonor, the secretary, he helped her. They are thick as thieves, those two. It is true she is older than he—but what do men care—if a woman is rich!"

There was a hint of bitterness in her tone.

"Stonor was in England," I put in.

"He says so—but who knows?"

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot quietly, "if we are to work together, you and I, we must have things clear. First, I will ask you a question."

"Yes, monsieur?"

"Are you aware of your mother's real name?"

Marthe looked at him for a minute, then, letting her head fall forward on her arms, she burst into tears.

"There, there," said Poirot, patting her on the shoulder. "Calm yourself, *petite,* I see that you know. Now a second question, did you know who M. Renauld was?"

"M. Renauld," she raised her head from her hands and gazed at him wonderingly.

"Ah, I see you do not know that. Now listen to me carefully."

Step by step, he went over the case, much as he had done to me on the day of our departure for England. Marthe listened spellbound. When he had finished, she drew a long breath.

"But you are wonderful—magnificent! You are the greatest detective in the world."

With a swift gesture she slipped off her chair and knelt before him with an abandonment that was wholly French.

"Save him, monsieur," she cried. "I love him so. Oh, save him, save him—save him!"

CHAPTER XXV

AN UNEXPECTED DÉNOUEMENT

WE WERE present the following morning at the examination of jack Renauld. Short as the time had been, I was shocked at the change that had taken place in the young prisoner. His cheeks had fallen in, there were deep black circles round his eyes, and he looked haggard and distraught, as one who had wooed sleep in vain for several nights. He betrayed no emotion at seeing us.

The prisoner and his counsel, Maître Grosier were accommodated with chairs. A formidable guard with resplendent sabre stood before the door. The patient *greffier* sat at his desk. The examination began.

"Renauld," began the magistrate, "do you deny that you were in Merlinville on the night of the crime?"

Jack did not reply at once, then he said with a hesitancy of manner which was piteous:

"I—I—told you that I was in Cherbourg."

Maître Grosier frowned and sighed. I realized at once that Jack Renauld was obstinately bent on conducting his own case as he wished, to the despair of his legal representative.

The magistrate turned sharply.

"Send in the station witnesses."

In a moment or two the door opened to admit a man whom I recognized as being a porter at Merlinville station.

"You were on duty on the night of June 7th?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You witnessed the arrival of the 11:40 train?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Look at the prisoner. Do you recognize him as having been one of the passengers to alight?"

"Yes, Monsieur le juge."

"There is no possibility of your being mistaken?"

"No, monsieur. I knew M. Jack Renauld well."

"Nor of your being mistaken as to the date?"

"No, monsieur. Because it was the following morning, June 8th, that we heard of the murder."

Another railway official was brought in, and confirmed the first one's evidence. The magistrate looked at Jack Renauld.

"These men have identified you positively. What have you to say?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing."

M. Hautet, exchanged a glance with the *greffier,* as the scratching of the latter's pen recorded the answer.

"Renauld," continued the magistrate, "do you recognize this?"

He took something from the table by his side, and held it out to the prisoner. I shuddered as I recognized the aeroplane dagger.

"Pardon," cried Maître Grosier. "I demand to speak to my client before he answers that question."

But Jack Renauld had no consideration for the feelings of the wretched Grosier. He waved him aside, and replied quietly:

"Certainly I recognize it. It is a present given by me to my mother, as a souvenir of the War."

"Is there, as far as you know, any duplicate of that dagger in existence?"

Again Maître Grosier burst out, and again Jack overrode him.

"Not that I know of. The setting was my own design."

Even the magistrate almost gasped at the boldness of the reply. It did, in very truth, seem as though Jack was rushing on his fate. I realized, of course, the vital necessity he was under of concealing, for Bella's sake, the fact that there was a duplicate dagger in the case. So long as there was supposed to be only one weapon, no suspicion was likely to attach to the girl who had had the second paper knife in her possession. He was valiantly shielding the woman he had once loved—but at what a cost to himself! I began to realize the magnitude of the task I had so lightly set Poirot. It would not be easy to secure the acquittal of Jack Renauld, by anything short of the truth.

M. Hautet spoke again, with a peculiarly biting inflection:

"Madame Renauld told us that this dagger was on her dressing table on the night of the crime. But Madame Renauld is a mother! It will doubtless astonish you, Renauld, but I consider it highly likely that Madame Renauld was mistaken, and that, by inadvertence perhaps, you had taken it with you to Paris. Doubtless you will contradict me—"

I saw the lad's handcuffed hands clench themselves. The perspiration stood out in beads upon his brow, as with a supreme effort he interrupted M. Hautet in a hoarse voice:

"I shall not contradict you. It is possible."

It was a stupefying moment. Maître Grosier rose to his feet, protesting:

"My client has undergone a considerable nervous strain. I should wish it put on record that I do not consider him answerable for what he says."

The magistrate quelled him angrily. For a moment a doubt seemed to arise in his own mind. Jack Renauld had almost overdone his part. He leaned forward, and gazed at the prisoner searchingly.

"Do you fully understand, Renauld, that on the answers you have given me I shall have no alternative but to commit you for trial?"

Jack's pale face flushed. He looked steadily back.

"M. Hautet, I swear that I did not kill my father."

But the magistrate's brief moment of doubt was over. He laughed a short, unpleasant laugh.

"Without doubt, without doubt—they are always innocent, our prisoners! By your own mouth you are condemned. You can offer no defence, no alibi—only a mere assertion which would not deceive a babe!—that you are not guilty. You killed your father, Renauld—a cruel and cowardly murder—for the sake of the money which you believed would come to you at his death. Your mother was an accessory after the fact. Doubtless, in view of the fact that she acted as a mother, the courts will extend an indulgence to her that they will not accord to you. And rightly so! Your crime was a horrible one—to be held in abhorrence by gods and men!" M. Hautet was enjoying himself, working up his period, steeped in the solemnity of the moment, and his own rôle as representative of justice. "You killed—and you must pay the consequences of your action. I speak to you, not as a man, but as Justice, eternal Justice, which—"

M. Hautet was interrupted—to his intense annoyance. The door was pushed open.

"M. le juge, M. le juge," stammered the attendant, "there is a lady who says—who says—"

"Who says what?" cried the justly incensed magistrate. "This is highly irregular. I forbid it—I absolutely forbid it."

But a slender figure pushed the stammering gendarme aside. Dressed all in black, with a long veil that hid her face, she advanced into the room.

My heart gave a sickening throb. She had come then! All my efforts were in vain. Yet I could not but admire the courage that had led her to take this step so unfalteringly.

She raised her veil—and I gasped. For, though as like her as two peas, this girl was not Cinderella! On the other hand, now that I saw her without the fair wig she had worn on the stage, I recognized her as the girl of the photograph in Jack Renauld's room.

"You are the Juge d'Instruction, M. Hautet?" she queried.

"Yes, but I forbid—"

"My name is Bella Duveen. I wish to give myself up for the murder of Mr. Renauld."

CHAPTER XXVI

I RECEIVE A LETTER

"My Friend:

"You will know all when you get this. Nothing that I can say will move Bella. She has gone out to give herself up. I am tired out with struggling.

"You will know now that I deceived you, that where you gave me trust I repaid you with lies. It will seem, perhaps, indefensible to you, but I should like, before I go out of your life for ever, to show you just how it all came about. If I knew that you forgave me, it would make life easier for me. I wasn't for myself I did it—that's the only thing I can put forward to say for myself.

"I'll begin from the day I met you in the boat train from Paris. I was uneasy then about Bella. She was just desperate about Jack Renauld, she'd have lain down on the ground for him to walk on, and when he began to change, and to stop writing so often, she began getting in a state. She got it into her head that he was keen on another girl—and of course, as it turned out afterwards, she was quite right there. She'd made up her mind to go to their Villa at Merlinville, and try and see Jack. She knew I was against it, and tried to give me the slip. I found she was not on the train at Calais, and determined I would not go on to England without her. I'd an uneasy feeling that something awful was going to happen if I couldn't prevent it.

"I met the next train from Paris. She was on it, and set upon going out then and there to Merlinville. I argued with her for all I was worth, but it wasn't any good. She was all strung up and set upon having her own way. Well, I washed my hands of it. I'd done all I could! It was getting late. I went to an hotel, and Bella started for Merlinville. I still couldn't shake off my feeling of what the books call 'impending disaster.'

"The next day came—but no Bella. She'd made a date with me to meet at the hotel, but she didn't keep it. No sign of her all day. I got more and more anxious. Then came an evening paper with the news.

"It was awful! I couldn't be sure, of course—but I was terribly afraid. I figured it out that Bella had met Papa Renauld and told him about her and Jack, and that he'd insulted her or something like that. We've both got terribly quick tempers.

"Then all the masked foreigner business came out, and I began to feel more at ease. But it still worried me that Bella hadn't kept her date with me.

"By the next morning, I was so rattled that I'd just got to go and see what I could. First thing, I ran up against you. You know all that . . . When I saw the dead man, looking so like Jack, and wearing Jack's fancy overcoat, I knew! And there was the identical paper-knife—wicked little thing!—that Jack had given Bella! Ten to one it had her finger-marks on it. I can't hope to explain to you the sort of helpless horror of that moment. I only saw one thing clearly—I must get hold of that dagger, and get right away with it before they found out it was gone. I pretended to faint, and whilst you were away getting water I took the thing and hid it away in my dress.

"I told you that I was staying at the Hôtel du Phare, but of course really I made a bee line back to Calais, and then on to England by the first boat. When we were in mid-Channel, I dropped that little devil of a dagger into the sea. Then I felt I could breathe again.

"Bella was at our digs in London. She looked like nothing on God's earth. I told her what I'd done, and that she was pretty safe for the time being. She stared at me, and then began laughing . . . laughing . . . laughing . . . it was horrible to hear her! I felt that the best thing to do was to keep busy. She'd go mad if she had time to brood on what she'd done. Luckily we got an engagement at once.

"And then, I saw you and your friend, watching us that night . . . I was frantic. You must suspect, or you wouldn't have tracked us down. I had to know the worst, so I followed you. I was desperate. And then, before I'd had time to say anything, I tumbled to it that it was *me* you suspected, not Bella! Or at least that you thought I *was* Bella since I'd stolen the dagger.

"I wish, honey, that you could see back into my mind at that moment . . . you'd forgive me, perhaps . . . I was so frightened, and muddled, and desperate. . . . All I could get clearly was that you would try and save me. I didn't know whether you'd be willing to save her . . . I thought very likely not—it wasn't the same thing! And I couldn't risk it! Bella's my twin—I'd got to do the best for her. So I went on lying. . . . I felt mean—I feel mean still. . . . That's all—enough too, you'll say, I expect. I ought to have trusted you. . . . If I had—

"As soon as the news was in the paper that Jack Renauld had been arrested, it was all up. Bella wouldn't even wait to see how things went. . . .

"I'm very tired. . . . I can't write any more. . . ."

She had began to sign herself Cinderella, but had crossed that out and written instead "Dulcie Duveen."

It was an ill-written, blurred epistle but I have kept it to this day.

Poirot was with me when I read it. The sheets fell from my hand, and I looked across at him.

"Did you know all the time that it was—the other?"

"Yes, my friend."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"To begin with, I could hardly believe it conceivable that you could make such a mistake. You had seen the photograph. The sisters are very alike, but by no means incapable of distinguishment."

"But the fair hair?"

"A wig, worn for the sake of a piquant contrast on the stage. Is it conceivable that with twins one should be fair and one dark?"

"Why didn't you tell me that night at the hotel in Coventry?"

"You were rather high-handed in your methods, *mon ami,"* said Poirot dryly. "You did not give me a chance."

"But afterwards?"

"Ah, afterwards! Well, to begin with, I was hurt at your want of faith in me. And then, I wanted to see whether your—feelings would stand the test of time. In fact, whether it was love, or a flash in the pan, with you. I should not have left you long in your error."

I nodded. His tone was too affectionate for me to bear resentment. I looked down on the sheets of the letter. Suddenly I picked them up from the floor, and pushed them across to him.

"Read that," I said. "I'd like you to."

He read it through in silence, then he looked up at me.

"What is it that worries you, Hastings."

This was quite a new mood in Poirot. His mocking manner seemed laid quite aside. I was able to say what I wanted without too much difficulty.

"She doesn't say—she doesn't say—well, not whether she cares for me or not!"

Poirot turned back the pages.

"I think you are mistaken, Hastings."

"Where?" I cried, leaning forward eagerly.

Poirot smiled.

"She tells you that in every line of the letter, *mon ami."*

"But where am I to find her? There's no address on the letter. There's a French stamp, that's all."

"Excite yourself not! Leave it to Papa Poirot. I can find her for you as soon as I have five little minutes!"

CHAPTER XXVII

JACK RENAULD'S STORY

"CONGRATULATIONS, M. Jack," said Poirot, wringing the lad warmly by the hand.

Young Renauld had come to us as soon as he was liberated—before starting for Merlinville to rejoin Marthe and his mother. Stonor accompanied him. His heartiness was in strong contrast to the lad's wan looks. It was plain that the boy was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Although delivered from the immediate peril that was hanging over him, the circumstances of his release were too painful to let him feel full relief. He smiled mournfully at Poirot, and said in a low voice:

"I went through it to protect her, and now it's all no use!"

"You could hardly expect the girl to accept the price of your life," remarked Stonor dryly. "She was bound to come forward when she saw you heading straight for the guillotine."

"*Eh ma foi!* and you were heading for it too!" added Poirot, with a slight twinkle. "You would have had Maître Grosier's death from rage on your conscience if you had gone on."

"He was a well meaning ass, I suppose," said Jack. "But he worried me horribly. You see, I couldn't very well take him into my confidence. But, my God! what's going to happen about Bella?"

"If I were you," said Poirot frankly. "I should not distress myself unduly. The French Courts are very lenient to youth and beauty, and the *crime passionnel.* A clever lawyer will make out a great case of extenuating circumstances. It will not be pleasant for you—"

"I don't care about that. You see, M. Poirot, in a way I *do* feel guilty of my father's murder. But for me, and my entanglement with this girl, he would be alive and well today. And then my cursed carelessness in taking away the wrong overcoat. I can't help feeling responsible for his death. It will haunt me for ever!"

"No, no," I said soothingly.

"Of course it's horrible to me to think that Bella killed my father," resumed Jack, "but I'd treated her shamefully. After I met Marthe, and realized I'd made a mistake, I ought to have written and told her so honestly. But I was so terrified of a row, and of its coming to Marthe's ears, and her thinking there was more in it than there ever had been, that

—well, I was a coward, and went on hoping the thing would die down of itself. I just drifted, in fact—not realizing that I was driving the poor kid desperate. If she'd really knifed me, as she meant to, I should have got no more than my deserts. And the way she's come forward now is downright plucky. I'd have stood the racket, you know—up to the end."

He was silent for a moment or two, and then burst out on another tack:

"What gets me is why the Governor should be wandering about in underclothes and my overcoat at that time of night. I suppose he'd just given the foreign johnnies the slip, and my mother must have made a mistake about its being 2 o'clock when they came. Or—or, it wasn't all a frame up, was it? I mean, my mother didn't think—couldn't think—that—that it was *me?"*

Poirot reassured him quickly.

"No, no, M. Jack. Have no fears on that score. As for the rest, I will explain it to you one of these days. It is rather curious. But will you recount to us exactly what did occur on that terrible evening?"

"There's very little to tell. I came from Cherbourg, as I told you, in order to see Marthe before going to the other end of the world. The train was late, and I decided to take the short cut across the golf links. I could easily get into the grounds of the Villa Marguerite from there. I had nearly reached the place when—"

He paused and swallowed.

"Yes?"

"I heard a terrible cry. It wasn't loud—a sort of choke and gasp—but it frightened me. For a moment I stood rooted to the spot. Then I came round the corner of a bush. There was moonlight. I saw the grave, and a figure lying face downwards with a dagger sticking in the back. And then—and then—I looked up and saw *her.* She was looking at me as though she saw a ghost—it's what she must have thought me at first—all expression seemed frozen out of her face by horror. And then she gave a cry, and turned and ran."

He stopped, trying to master his emotion.

"And afterwards?" asked Poirot gently.

"I really don't know. I stayed there for a time, dazed. And then I realized I'd better get away as fast as I could. It didn't occur to me that they would suspect me, but I was afraid of being called upon to give evidence against her. I walked to St. Beauvais as I told you, and got a car from there back to Cherbourg."

A knock came at the door, and a page entered with a telegram which he delivered to Stonor. He tore it open. Then he got up from his seat.

"Mrs. Renauld has regained consciousness," he said.

"Ah!" Poirot sprang to his feet. "Let us all go to Merlinville at once!"

A hurried departure was made forthwith. Stonor at Jack's instance, agreed to stay behind and do all that could be done for Bella Duveen. Poirot, Jack Renauld and I set off in the Renauld car.

The run took just over forty minutes. As we approached the doorway of the Villa Marguerite, Jack Renauld shot a questioning glance at Poirot.

"How would it be if you went on first—to break the news to my mother that I am free—"

"While you break it in person to Mademoiselle Marthe, eh?" finished Poirot, with a twinkle. "But yes, by all means, I was about to propose such an arrangement myself."

Jack Renauld did not wait for more. Stopping the car, he swung himself out, and ran up the path to the front door. We went on in the car to the Villa Geneviève.

"Poirot," I said, "do you remember how we arrived here that first day? And were met by the news of M. Renauld's murder?"

"Ah! yes, truly. Not so long ago, either. But what a lot of things have happened since then—especially for *you, mon ami!*"

"Poirot, what have you done about finding Bel—I mean Dulcie?"

"Calm yourself, Hastings. I arrange everything."

"You're being a precious long time about it," I grumbled.

Poirot changed the subject.

"Then the beginning, now the end," he moralized, as we rang the bell. "And, considered as a case, the end is profoundly unsatisfactory."

"Yes, indeed," I sighed.

"You are regarding it from the sentimental standpoint, Hastings. That was not my meaning. We will hope that Mademoiselle Bella will be dealt with leniently, and after all Jack Renauld cannot marry both the girls. I spoke from a professional standpoint. This is not a crime well ordered and regular, such as a detective delights in. The *misc en scène* designed by Georges Conneau, that indeed is perfect, but the *dénouement*—ah, no! A man killed by accident in a girl's fit of anger—ah, indeed, what order or method is there in that?"

And in the midst of a fit of laughter on my part at Poirot's peculiarities, the door was opened by Françoise.

Poirot explained that he must see Mrs. Renauld at once, and the old woman conducted him upstairs. I remained in the *salon.* It was some time before Poirot reappeared. He was looking unusually grave.

"Vous voilà, Hastings! Sacré tonnerre, but there are squalls ahead!"

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"I would hardly have credited it," said Poirot thoughtfully, "but women are very unexpected."

"Here are Jack and Marthe Daubreuil," I exclaimed, looking out of the window.

Poirot bounded out of the room, and met the young couple on the steps outside.

"Do not enter. It is better not. Your mother is very upset."

"I know, I know," said Jack Renauld. "I must go up to her at once."

"But no, I tell you. It is better not."

"But Marthe and I—"

"In any case, do not take Mademoiselle with you. Mount, if you must, but you would be wise to be guided by me."

A voice on the stairs behind made us all start.

"I thank you for your good offices, M. Poirot, but I will make my own wishes clear."

We stared in astonishment. Descending the stairs, leaning upon Léonie's arm, was Mrs. Renauld, her head still bandaged. The French girl was weeping, and imploring her mistress to return to bed.

"Madame will kill herself. It is contrary to all the doctor's orders!"

But Mrs. Renauld came on.

"Mother," cried Jack, starting forward. But with a gesture she drove him back.

"I am no mother of yours! You are no son of mine! From this day and hour I renounce you."

"Mother," cried the lad, stupefied.

For a moment she seemed to waver, to falter before the anguish in his voice. Poirot made a mediating gesture, but instantly she regained command of herself.

"Your father's blood is on your head. You are morally guilty of his death. You thwarted and defied him over this girl, and by your heartless treatment of another girl, you brought about his death. Go out from my house. Tomorrow I intend to take such steps as shall make it certain that you shall never touch a penny of his money. Make your way in the world as best you can with the help of the girl who is the daughter of your father's bitterest enemy!"

And slowly, painfully, she retraced her way upstairs.

We were all dumbfounded—totally unprepared for such a demonstration. Jack Renauld, worn out with all he had already gone through, swayed and nearly fell. Poirot and I went quickly to his assistance.

"He is overdone," murmured Poirot to Marthe. "Where can we take him?"

"But home! To the Villa Marguerite. We will nurse him, my mother and I. My poor Jack!"

We got the lad to the Villa, where he dropped limply on to a chair in a semi-dazed condition. Poirot felt his head and hands.

"He has fever. The long strain begins to tell. And now this shock on top of it. Get him to bed, and Hastings and I will summon a doctor."

A doctor was soon procured. After examining the patient, he gave it as his opinion that it was simply a case of nerve strain. With perfect rest and quiet, the lad might be almost restored by the next day, but, if excited, there was a chance of brain fever. It would be advisable for some one to sit up all night with him.

Finally, having done all we could, we left him in the charge of Marthe and her mother, and set out for the town. It was past our usual hour of dining, and we were both famished. The first restaurant we came to assuaged the pangs of hunger with an excellent *omelette,* and an equally excellent *entrecôte* to follow.

"And now for quarters for the night," said Poirot, when at length *café noir* had completed the meal. "Shall we try our old friend, the Hôtel des Bains?"

We traced our steps there without more ado. Yes, Messieurs could be accommodated with two good rooms overlooking the sea. Then Poirot asked a question which surprised me.

"Has an English lady, Miss Robinson, arrived?"

"Yes, monsieur. She is in the little *salon.*"

"Ah!"

"Poirot," I cried, keeping pace with him as he walked along the corridor, "who on earth is Miss Robinson?"

Poirot beamed kindly on me.

"It is that I have arranged you a marriage, Hastings."

"But, I say—"

"Bah!" said Poirot, giving me a friendly push over the threshold of the door. "Do you think I wish to trumpet aloud in Merlinville the name of Duveen?"

It was indeed Cinderella who rose to greet us. I took her hands in both of mine. My eyes said the rest.

Poirot cleared his throat.

"Mes enfants," he said, "for the moment we have no time for sentiment. There is work ahead of us. Mademoiselle, were you able to do what I asked you?"

In response, Cinderella took from her bag an object wrapped up in paper, and handed it silently to Poirot. The latter unwrapped it. I gave a start—for it was the aeroplane dagger which I understood she had cast into the sea. Strange, how reluctant women always are to destroy the most compromising of objects and documents!

"Très bien, mon enfant," said Poirot. "I am pleased with you. Go now and rest yourself. Hastings here and I have work to do. You shall see him tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" asked the girl, her eyes widening.

"You shall hear all about it tomorrow."

"Because wherever you're going, I'm coming too."

"But mademoiselle—"

"I'm coming too, I tell you."

Poirot realized that it was futile to argue further. He gave in.

"Come then, mademoiselle. But it will not be amusing. In all probability nothing will happen."

The girl made no reply.

Twenty minutes later we set forth. It was quite dark now, a close, oppressive evening. Poirot led the way out of the town in the direction of the Villa Geneviève. But when he reached the Villa Marguerite he paused.

"I should like to assure myself that all goes well with Jack Renauld. Come with me, Hastings. Mademoiselle will perhaps remain outside. Madame Daubreuil might say something which would wound her."

We unlatched the gate, and walked up the path. As we went round to the side of the house, I drew Poirot's attention to a window on the first floor. Thrown sharply on the blind was the profile of Marthe Daubreuil.

"Ah!" said Poirot. "I figure to myself that that is the room where we shall find Jack Renauld."

Madame Daubreuil opened the door to us. She explained that Jack was much the same, but perhaps we would like to see for ourselves. She led us upstairs and into the bedroom. Marthe Daubreuil was embroidering by a table with a lamp on it. She put her finger to her lips as we entered.

Jack Renauld was sleeping an uneasy fitful sleep, his head turning from side to side, and his face still unduly flushed.

"Is the doctor coming again?" asked Poirot in a whisper.

"Not unless we send. He is sleeping—that is the great thing. *Maman* made him a tisane."

She sat down again with her embroidery as we left the room. Madame Daubreuil accompanied us down the stairs. Since I had learned of her past history, I viewed this woman with increased interest. She stood there with her eyes cast down, the same very faint enigmatical smile that I remembered on her lips. And suddenly I felt afraid of her, as one might feel afraid of a beautiful poisonous snake.

"I hope we have not deranged you, madame?" said Poirot politely as she opened the door for us to pass out.

"Not at all, monsieur."

"By the way," said Poirot, as though struck by an afterthought, "M. Stonor has not been in Merlinville today, has he?"

I could not at all fathom the point of this question which I well knew to be meaningless as far as Poirot was concerned.

Madame Daubreuil replied quite composedly:

"Not that I know of."

"He has not had an interview with Mrs. Renauld?"

"How should I know that, monsieur?"

"True," said Poirot. "I thought you might have seen him coming or going, that is all. Good night, madame."

"Why—" I began.

"No, *'whys,'* Hastings. There will be time for that later."

We rejoined Cinderella and made our way rapidly in the direction of the Villa Geneviève. Poirot looked over his shoulder once at the lighted window and the profile of Marthe as she bent over her work.

"He is being guarded at all events," he muttered.

Arrived at the Villa Geneviève, Poirot took up his stand behind some bushes to the left of the drive, where, whilst enjoying a good view ourselves, we were completely hidden from sight. The Villa itself was in total darkness, everybody was without doubt in bed and asleep. We were almost immediately under the window of Mrs. Renauld's bedroom, which window, I noticed, was open. It seemed to me that it was upon this spot that Poirot's eyes were fixed.

"What are we going to do?" I whispered.

"Watch."

"But—"

"I do not expect anything to happen for at least an hour, probably two hours, but the—"

But his words were interrupted by a long thin drawn cry:

"Help!"

A light flashed up in the second floor room on the right hand side of the house. The cry came from there. And even as we watched there came a shadow on the blind as of two people struggling.

"Mille tenerres!" cried Poirot. "She must have changed her room!"

Dashing forward, he battered wildly on the front door. Then rushing to the tree in the flower-bed, he swarmed up it with the agility of a cat. I followed him, as with a bound he sprang in through the open window. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Dulcie reaching the branch behind me.

"Take care," I exclaimed.

"Take care of your grandmother!" retorted the girl. "This is child's play to me."

Poirot had rushed through the empty room and was pounding on the door leading into the corridor.

"Locked and bolted on the outside," he growled. "And it will take time to burst it open."

The cries for help were getting noticeably fainter. I saw despair in Poirot's eyes. He and I together put our shoulders to the door.

Cinderella's voice, calm and dispassionate, came from the window:

"You'll be too late, I guess I'm the only one who can do anything."

Before I could move a hand to stop her, she appeared to leap upward into space. I rushed and looked out. To my horror, I saw her hanging by her hands from the roof, propelling herself along by jerks into the direction of the lighted window.

"Good heavens! She'll be killed," I cried.

"You forget. She's a professional acrobat, Hastings. It was the providence of the good God that made her insist on coming with us tonight. I only pray that she may be in time. Ah!"

A cry of absolute terror floated out on to the night as the girl disappeared through the right-hand window; then in Cinderella's clear tones came the words:

"No, you don't! I've got you—and my wrists are just like steel."

At the same moment the door of our prison was opened cautiously by Françoise. Poirot brushed her aside unceremoniously and rushed down the passage to where the other maids were grouped round the further door.

"It's locked on the inside, monsieur."

There was the sound of a heavy fall within. After a moment or two the key turned and the door swung slowly open. Cinderella, very pale, beckoned us in.

"She is safe?" demanded Poirot.

"Yes, I was just in time. She was exhausted."

Mrs. Renauld was half sitting, half lying on the bed. She was gasping for breath.

"Nearly strangled me," she murmured painfully.

The girl picked up something from the floor and handed it to Poirot. It was a rolled up ladder of silk rope, very fine but quite strong.

"A getaway," said Poirot. "By the window, whilst we were battering at the door. Where is—the other?"

The girl stood aside a little and pointed. On the ground lay a figure wrapped in some dark material a fold of which hid the face.

"Dead?"

She nodded.

"I think so."

"Head must have struck the marble fender."

"But who is it?" I cried.

"The murderer of M. Renauld, Hastings. And the would-be murderer of Madame Renauld."

Puzzled and uncomprehending, I knelt down, and lifting the fold of cloth, looked into the dead beautiful face of Marthe Daubreuil!

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOURNEY'S END

I HAVE confused memories of the further events of that night. Poirot seemed deaf to my repeated questions. He was engaged in overwhelming Françoise with reproaches for not having told him of Mrs. Renauld's change of sleeping quarters.

I caught him by the shoulder, determined to attract his attention, and make myself heard.

"But you *must* have known," I expostulated. "You were taken up to see her this afternoon."

Poirot deigned to attend to me for a brief moment.

"She had been wheeled on a sofa into the middle room—her boudoir," he explained.

"But, monsieur," cried Françoise, "Madame changed her room almost immediately after the crime! The associations—they were too distressing!"

"Then why was I not told," vociferated Poirot, striking the table, and working himself into a first-class passion. "I demand you—why—was—I—not—told? You are an old woman completely imbecile! And Léonie and Denise are no better. All of you are triple idiots! Your stupidity has nearly caused the death of your mistress. But for this courageous child—"

He broke off, and, darting across the room to where the girl was bending over ministering to Mrs. Renauld, he embraced her with Gallic fervour—slightly to my annoyance.

I was aroused from my condition of mental fog by a sharp command from Poirot to fetch the doctor immediately on Mrs. Renauld's behalf. After that, I might summon the police. And he added, to complete my dudgeon:

"It will hardly be worth your while to return here. I shall be too busy to attend to you, and of Mademoiselle here I make a *garde-malade.*"

I retired with what dignity I could command. Having done my errands, I returned to the hotel. I understood next to nothing of what had occurred. The events of the night seemed fantastic and impossible. Nobody would answer my questions. Nobody had seemed to hear them. Angrily, I flung myself into bed, and slept the sleep of the bewildered and utterly exhausted.

I awoke to find the sun pouring in through the open windows and Poirot, neat and smiling, sitting beside the bed.

"*Enfin* you wake! But it is that you are a famous sleeper, Hastings! Do you know that it is nearly eleven o'clock?"

I groaned and put a hand to my head.

"I must have been dreaming," I said. "Do you know, I actually dreamt that we found Marthe Daubreuil's body in Mrs. Renauld's room, and that you declared her to have murdered Mr. Renauld?"

"You were not dreaming. All that is quite true."

"But Bella Duveen killed Mr. Renauld?"

"Oh, no, Hastings, she did not! She said she did—yes—but that was to save the man she loved from the guillotine."

"What?"

"Remember Jack Renauld's story. They both arrived on the scene at the same instant, and each took the other to be the perpetrator of the crime. The girl stares at him in horror, and then with a cry rushes away. But, when she hears that the crime has been brought home to him, she cannot bear it, and comes forward to accuse herself and save him from certain death."

Poirot leaned back in his chair, and brought the tips of his fingers together in familiar style.

"The case was not quite satisfactory to me," he observed judicially. "All along I was strongly under the impression that we were dealing with a cold-blooded and premeditated crime committed by some one who had been contented (very cleverly) with using M. Renauld's own plans for throwing the police off the track. The great criminal (as you may remember my remarking to you once) is always supremely simple."

I nodded.

"Now, to support this theory, the criminal must have been fully cognizant of M. Renauld's plans. That leads us to Madame Renauld. But facts fail to support any theory of her guilt. Is there any one else who might have known of them? Yes. From Marthe Daubreuil's own lips we have the admission that she overheard M. Renauld's quarrel with the tramp. If she could overhear that, there is no reason why she should not have heard everything else, especially if M. and Madame Renauld were imprudent enough to discuss their plans sitting on the bench. Remember how easily you overhead Marthe's conversation with Jack Renauld from that spot."

"But what possible motive could Marthe have for murdering Mr. Renauld?" I argued.

"What motive? Money! M. Renauld was a millionaire several times over, and at his death (or so she and Jack believed) half that vast fortune would pass to his son. Let us reconstruct the scene from the standpoint of Marthe Daubreuil.

"Marthe Daubreuil overhears what passes between Renauld and his wife. So far he has been a nice little source of income to the Daubreuil mother and daughter, but now he proposes to escape from their toils. At first, possibly, her idea is to prevent that escape. But a bolder idea takes its place, and one that fails to horrify the daughter of Jeanne Beroldy! At present M. Renauld stands inexorably in the way of her marriage with Jack. If the latter defies his father, he will be a pauper—which is not at all to the mind of Mademoiselle Marthe. In fact, I doubt if she has ever cared a straw for Jack Renauld. She can simulate emotion, but in reality she is of the same cold, calculating type as her mother. I doubt, too, whether she was really very sure of her hold over the boy's affections. She had dazzled and captivated him, but separated from her, as his father could so easily manage to separate him, she might lose him. But with M. Renauld dead, and Jack the heir to half his millions, the marriage can take place at once, and at a stroke she will attain wealth—not the beggarly thousands that have been extracted from him so far. And her clever brain takes in the simplicity of the thing. It is all so easy. M. Renauld is planning all the circumstances of his death—she has only to step in at the right moment and turn the farce into a grim reality. And here comes in the second point which led me infallibly to Marthe Daubreuil—the dagger! Jack Renauld had *three* souvenirs made. One he gave to his mother, one to Bella Duveen; was it not highly probable that he had given the third one to Marthe Daubreuil?

"So then, to sum up, there were four points of note against Marthe Daubreuil:

"(1) Marthe Daubreuil could have overheard M. Renauld's plans.

"(2) Marthe Daubreuil had a direct interest in causing M. Renauld's death.

"(3) Marthe Daubreuil was the daughter of the notorious Madame Beroldy who in my opinion was morally and virtually the murderess of her husband, although it may have been Georges Conneau's hand which struck the actual blow.

"(4) Marthe Daubreuil was the only person, besides Jack Renauld, likely to have the third dagger in her possession."

Poirot paused and cleared his throat.

"Of course, when I learned of the existence of the other girl, Bella Duveen, I realized that it was quite possible that *she* might have killed M. Renauld. The solution did not commend itself to me, because, as I pointed out to you, Hastings, an expert, such as I am, likes to meet a foeman worthy of his steel. Still one must take crimes as one finds them, not as one would like them to be. It did not seem very likely that Bella Duveen would be wandering about carrying a souvenir paper knife in her hand, but of course she might have had some idea all the time of revenging herself on Jack Renauld. When she actually came forward and confessed to the murder, it seemed that all was over. And yet—I was not satisfied, *mon ami. I was not satisfied.* . . .

"I went over the case again minutely, and I came to the same conclusion as before. If it was *not* Bella Duveen, the only other person who could have committed the crime was Marthe Daubreuil. But I had not one single proof against her!

"And then you showed me that letter from Mademoiselle Dulcie, and I saw a chance of settling the matter once for all. The original dagger was stolen by Dulcie Duveen and thrown into the sea—since, as she thought, it belonged to her sister. But if, by any chance, it was *not* her sister's, but the one given by Jack to Marthe Daubreuil—why then, Bella Duveen's dagger would be still intact! I said no word to you, Hastings (it was no time for romance) but I sought out Mademoiselle Dulcie, told her as much as I deemed needful, and set her to search amongst the effects of her sister. Imagine my elation, when she sought me out (according to my instructions) as Miss Robinson with the precious souvenir in her possession!

"In the meantime I had taken steps to force Mademoiselle Marthe into the open. By my orders, Mrs. Renauld repulsed her son, and declared her intention of making a will on the morrow which should cut him off from ever enjoying even a portion of his father's fortune. It was a desperate step, but a necessary one, and Madame Renauld was fully prepared to take the risk—though unfortunately she also never thought of mentioning her change of room. I suppose she took it for granted that I knew. All happened as I thought. Marthe Daubreuil made a last bold bid for the Renauld millions—and failed!"

"What absolutely bewilders me," I said, "is how she ever got into the house without our seeing her. It seems an absolute miracle. We left her behind at the Villa Marguerite, we go straight to the Villa Geneviève—and yet she is there before us!"

"Ah, but we did not leave her behind. She was out of the Villa Marguerite by the back way whilst we were talking to her mother in the hall. That is where, as the Americans say, she 'put it over' on Hercule Poirot!"

"But the shadow on the blind? We saw it from the road."

"Eh bien, when we looked up, Madame Daubreuil had just had time to run upstairs and take her place."

"Madame Daubreuil?"

"Yes. One is old, and one is young, one dark, and one fair, but, for the purpose of a silhouette on a blind, their profiles are singularly alike. Even I did not suspect—triple imbecile that I was! I thought I had plenty of time before me—that she would not try to gain admission to the Villa until much later. She had brains, that beautiful Mademoiselle Marthe."

"And her object was to murder Mrs. Renauld?"

"Yes. The whole fortune would then pass to her son. But it would have been suicide, *mon ami!* On the floor by Marthe Daubreuil's body, I found a pad and a little bottle of chloroform and a hypodermic syringe containing a fatal dose of morphine. You understand? The chloroform first—then when the victim is unconscious the prick of the needle. By the morning the smell of the chloroform has quite disappeared, and the syringe lies where it has fallen from Madame Renauld's hand. What would he say, the excellent M. Hautet? 'Poor woman! What did I tell you? The shock of joy, it was too much on top of the rest! Did I not say that I should not be surprised if her brain became unhinged. Altogether a most tragic case, the Renauld Case!'

"However, Hastings, things did not go quite as Mademoiselle Marthe had planned. To begin with, Madame Renauld was awake and waiting for her. There is a struggle. But Madame Renauld is terribly weak still. There is a last chance for Marthe Daubreuil. The idea of suicide is at an end, but if she can silence Madame Renauld with her strong hands, make a getaway with her little silk ladder whilst we are still battering on the inside of the further door, and be back at the Villa Marguerite before we return there, it will be hard to prove anything against her. But she was checkmated—not by Hercule Poirot—but by *la petite acrobate* with her wrists of steel."

I mused over the whole story.

"When did you first begin to suspect Marthe Daubreuil, Poirot? When she told us she had overheard the quarrel in the garden?"

Poirot smiled.

"My friend, do you remember when we drove into Merlinville that first day? And the beautiful girl we saw standing at the gate? You asked me if I had not noticed a young goddess, and I replied to you that I had seen only a girl with anxious eyes. That is how I have thought of Marthe Daubreuil from the beginning. *The girl with the anxious eyes!* Why was she anxious? Not on Jack Renauld's behalf, for she did not know then that he had been in Merlinville the previous evening."

"By the way," I exclaimed, "how is Jack Renauld?"

"Much better. He is still at the Villa Marguerite. But Madame Daubreuil has disappeared. The police are looking for her."

"Was she in with her daughter, do you think?"

"We shall never know. Madame is a lady who can keep her secrets. And I doubt very much if the police will ever find her."

"Has Jack Renauld been—told?"

"Not yet."

"It will be a terrible shock to him."

"Naturally. And yet, do you know, Hastings, I doubt if his heart was ever seriously engaged. So far we have looked upon Bella Duveen as a siren, and Marthe Daubreuil as the girl he really loved. But I think that if we reversed the terms we should come nearer to the truth. Marthe Daubreuil was very beautiful. She set herself to fascinate Jack, and she succeeded, but remember his curious reluctance to break with the other girl. And see how he was willing to go to the guillotine rather than implicate her. I have a little idea that when he learns the truth he will be horrified—revolted, and his false love will wither away."

"What about Giraud?"

"He has a *crise* of the nerves, that one! He has been obliged to return to Paris."

We both smiled.

Poirot proved a fairly true prophet. When at length the doctor pronounced Jack Renauld strong enough to hear the truth, it was Poirot who broke it to him. The shock was indeed terrific. Yet Jack rallied better than I could have supposed possible. His mother's devotion helped him to live through those difficult days. The mother and son were inseparable now.

There was a further revelation to come. Poirot had acquainted Mrs. Renauld with the fact that he knew her secret, and had represented to her that Jack should not be left in ignorance of his father's past.

"To hide the truth, never does it avail, madame! Be brave and tell him. everything."

With a heavy heart Mrs. Renauld consented, and her son learned that the father he had loved had been in actual fact a fugitive from justice. A halting question was promptly answered by Poirot.

"Reassure yourself, M. Jack. The world knows nothing. As far as I can see, there is no obligation for me to take the police into my confidence. Throughout the case I have acted, not for them, but for your father. Justice overtook him at last, but no one need ever know that he and Georges Conneau were one and the same."

There were, of course, various points in the case that remained puzzling to the police, but Poirot explained things in so plausible a fashion that all query about them was gradually stilled.

Shortly after we got back to London, I noticed a magnificent model of a foxhound adorning Poirot's mantelpiece. In answer to my inquiring glance, Poirot nodded.

"Mais, oui! I got my 500 francs! Is he not a splendid fellow? I call him Giraud!"

A few days later Jack Renauld came to see us with a resolute expression on his face.

"M. Poirot, I've come to say good-bye. I'm sailing for South America almost immediately. My father had large interests over the continent, and I mean to start a new life out there."

"You go alone, M. Jack?"

"My mother comes with me—and I shall keep Stonor on as my secretary. He likes out of-the-way parts of the world."

"No one else goes with you?"

Jack flushed.

"You mean—?"

"A girl who loves you very dearly—who has been willing to lay down her life for you."

"How could I ask her?" muttered the boy. "After all that has happened, could I go to her and—oh, what sort of a lame story could I tell?"

"Les femmes—they have a wonderful genius for manufacturing crutches for stories like that."

"Yes, but—I've been such a damned fool!"

"So have all of us, one time and another," observed Poirot philosophically.

But Jack's face had hardened.

"There's something else. I'm my father's son. Would any one marry me, knowing that?"

"You are your father's son, you say. Hastings here will tell you that I believe in heredity—"

"Well, then—"

"Wait. I know a woman, a woman of courage and endurance, capable of great love, of supreme self-sacrifice—"

The boy looked up. His eyes softened.

"My mother!"

"Yes. You are your mother's son as well as your father's. Go then to Mademoiselle Bella. Tell her everything. Keep nothing back—and see what she will say!"

Jack looked irresolute.

"Go to her as a boy no longer, but a man—a man bowed by the fate of the Past, and the fate of Today, but looking forward to a new and wonderful life. Ask her to share it with you. You may not realize it, but your love for each other has been tested in the fire and not found wanting. You have both been willing to lay down your lives for each other."

And what of Captain Arthur Hastings, humble chronicler of these pages?

There is some talk of his joining the Renaulds on a ranch across the seas, but for the end of this story I prefer to go back to a morning in the garden of the Villa Geneviève.

"I can't call you Bella," I said, "since it isn't your name. And Dulcie seems so unfamiliar. So it's got to be Cinderella. Cinderella married the Prince, you remember. I'm not a Prince, but—"

She interrupted me.

"Cinderella warned him, I'm sure! You see, she couldn't promise to turn into a princess. She was only a little scullion after all—"

"It's the Prince's turn to interrupt," I interpolated. "Do you know what he said?"

"No?"

"Hell!" said the Prince—and kissed her!

And I suited the action to the word.

PERIL
AT
END HOUSE

To

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

To whom I shall always be grateful for his
friendship and the encouragement he
gave me many years ago

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE MAJESTIC HOTEL	355
II	END HOUSE	364
III	ACCIDENTS?	373
IV	THERE MUST BE SOMETHING!	381
V	MR AND MRS CROFT	386
VI	A CALL UPON MR VYSE	394
VII	TRAGEDY	400
VIII	THE FATAL SHAWL	406
IX	A. TO J.	413
X	NICK'S SECRET	423
XI	THE MOTIVE	430
XII	ELLEN	434
XIII	LETTERS	441
XIV	THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING WILL	447
XV	STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF FREDERICA	455
XVI	INTERVIEW WITH MR WHITFIELD	461
XVII	A BOX OF CHOCOLATES	469
XVIII	THE FACE AT THE WINDOW	478
XIX	POIROT PRODUCES A PLAY	489
XX	J.	494
XXI	THE PERSON—K.	496
XXII	THE END OF THE STORY	499

CHAPTER I

THE MAJESTIC HOTEL

No seaside town in the south of England is, I think, as attractive as St. Loo. It is well named the Queen of Watering Places and reminds one forcibly of the Riviera. The Cornish coast is to my mind every bit as fascinating as that of the south of France.

I remarked as much to my friend, Hercule Poirot.

"So it said on our menu in the restaurant car yesterday, *mon ami*. Your remark is not original."

"But don't you agree?"

He was smiling to himself and did not at once answer my question. I repeated it.

"A thousand pardons, Hastings. My thoughts were wandering. Wandering indeed to that part of the world you mentioned just now."

"The south of France?"

"Yes. I was thinking of that last winter that I spent there and of the events which occurred."

I remembered. A murder had been committed on the Blue Train, and the mystery—a complicated and baffling one—had been solved by Poirot with his usual unerring acumen.

"How I wish I had been with you," I said with deep regret.

"I too," said Poirot. "Your experience would have been invaluable to me."

I looked at him sideways. As a result of long habit, I distrust his compliments but he appeared perfectly serious. And after all, why not? I have a very long experience of the methods he employs.

"What I particularly missed was your vivid imagination, Hastings," he went on dreamily. "One needs a certain amount of light relief. My valet, Georges, an admirable man with whom I sometimes permitted myself to discuss a point, has no imagination whatever."

This remark seemed to me quite irrelevant.

"Tell me, Poirot," I said. "Are you never tempted to renew your activities? This passive life—"

"Suits me admirably, my friend. To sit in the sun—what could be more charming? To step from your pedestal at the zenith of your fame—what could be a grander gesture? They say of me—'That is Hercule Poirot!—

The great—the unique!—There was never anyone like him, there never will be!' Eh bien—I am satisfied. I ask no more. I am modest."

I should not myself have used the word modest. It seemed to me that my little friend's egotism had certainly not declined with his years. He leaned back in his chair, caressing his moustache and almost purring with self-satisfaction.

We were sitting on one of the terraces of the Majestic Hotel. It is the biggest hotel in St. Loo and stands in its own grounds on a headland overlooking the sea. The gardens of the hotel lay below us freely interspersed with palm-trees. The sea was of a deep and lovely blue, the sky clear and the sun shining with all the single-hearted fervour an August sun should (but in England so often does not) have. There was a vigorous humming of bees, a pleasant sound—and altogether nothing could have been more ideal.

We had only arrived last night, and this was the first morning of what we proposed should be a week's stay. If only these weather conditions continued, we should indeed have a perfect holiday.

I picked up the morning paper which had fallen from my hand and resumed my perusal of the morning's news. The political situation seemed unsatisfactory but uninteresting, there was trouble in China, there was a long account of a rumoured City swindle but on the whole there was no news of a very thrilling order.

"Curious thing this parrot disease," I remarked as I turned the sheet.

"Very curious."

"Two more deaths at Leeds, I see."

"Most regrettable."

I turned a page.

"Still no news of that flying fellow, Seton, in his round the world flight. Pretty plucky, these fellows. That amphibian machine of his, the Albatross, must be a great invention. Too bad if he's gone west. Not that they've given up hope yet. He may have made one of the Pacific Islands."

"The Solomon islanders are still cannibals, are they not?" inquired Poirot pleasantly.

"Must be a fine fellow. That sort of thing makes one feel it's a good thing to be an Englishman after all."

"It consoles for the defeats at Wimbledon," said Poirot.

"I—I didn't mean," I began.

My friend waved my attempted apology aside gracefully.

"Me," he announced. "I am not amphibian, like the machine of the poor Captain Seton, but I am cosmopolitan. And for the English I have always had, as you know, a great admiration. The thorough way, for instance, in which they read the daily paper."

My attention had strayed to political news.

"They seem to be giving the Home Secretary a pretty bad time of it," I remarked with a chuckle.

"The poor man. He has his troubles, that one. Ah! yes. So much so that he seeks for help in the most improbable quarters."

I stared at him.

With a slight smile, Poirot drew from his pocket his morning's correspondence, neatly secured by a rubber band. From this he selected one letter which he tossed across to me.

"It must have missed us yesterday," he said.

I read the letter with a pleasurable feeling of excitement.

"But, Poirot," I cried. "This is most flattering!"

"You think so, my friend?"

"He speaks in the warmest terms of your ability."

"He is right," said Poirot, modestly averting his eyes.

"He begs you to investigate this matter for him—puts it as a personal favour."

"Quite so. It is unnecessary to repeat all this to me. You understand, my dear Hastings, I have read the letter myself."

"It's too bad," I cried. "This will put an end to our holiday."

"No, no, *calmez vous*—there is no question of that."

"But the Home Secretary says the matter is urgent."

"He may be right—or again he may not. These politicians they are easily excited. I have seen myself, in the Chambre des Deputés in Paris—"

"Yes, yes, but Poirot, surely we ought to be making arrangements? The express to London has gone—it leaves at twelve o'clock. The next—"

"Calm yourself, Hastings, calm yourself I pray of you! Always the excitement, the agitation. We are not going to London today—nor yet tomorrow."

"But this summons—"

"Does not concern me. I do not belong to your police force, Hastings. I am asked to undertake a case as a private investigator. I refuse."

"You refuse?"

"Certainly. I write with perfect politeness, tender my regrets, my apologies, explain that I am completely desolated—but what will you? I have retired—I am finished."

"You are not finished," I exclaimed warmly.

Poirot patted my knee.

"There speaks the good friend—the faithful dog. And you have reason, too. The grey cells, they still function—the order, the method—it is still there. But when I have retired, my friend, I have retired! It is finished! I am not a stage favourite who gives the world a dozen farewells. In all generosity I say: Let the young men have a chance. They may possibly do something creditable. I doubt it, but they may. Anyway they will do well enough for this doubtless tiresome affair of the Home Secretary's."

"But, Poirot, the compliment!"

"Me, I am above compliments. The Home Secretary being a man of sense, realizes that if he can only obtain my services all will be successful. What will you? He is unlucky. Hercule Poirot has solved his last case."

I looked at him. In my heart of hearts I deplored his obstinacy. The solving of such a case as was indicated might add still further lustre to his already world-wide reputation. Nevertheless I could not but admire his unyielding attitude.

Suddenly a thought struck me and I smiled.

"I wonder," I said "that you are not afraid. Such an emphatic pronouncement will surely tempt the gods."

"Impossible," he replied, "that anyone should shake the decision of Hercule Poirot."

"Impossible, Poirot?"

"You are right, *mon ami*, one should not use such a word. Eh, *ma foi*, I do not say that if a bullet should strike the wall by my head, I would not investigate the matter! One is human after all!"

I smiled. A little pebble had just struck the terrace beside us, and Poirot's fanciful analogy from it tickled my fancy. He stooped now and picked up the pebble as he went on.

"Yes—one is human. One is the sleeping dog—well and good, but the sleeping dog can be roused. There is a proverb in your language that says so."

"In fact," I said, "if you find a dagger planted by your pillow tomorrow morning—let the criminal who put it there beware!"

He nodded, but rather absently.

Suddenly, to my surprise, he rose and descended the couple of steps that led from the terrace to the garden. As he did so, a girl came into sight hurrying up towards us.

I had just registered the impression that she was a decidedly pretty girl when my attention was drawn to Poirot who, not looking where he was going, had stumbled over a root and fallen heavily. He was just abreast of the girl at the time and she and I between us helped him to his feet. My attention was naturally on my friend, but I was conscious of an impression of dark hair, an impish face and big dark blue eyes.

"A thousand pardons," stammered Poirot. "Mademoiselle, you are most kind. I regret exceedingly—ouch!—my foot he pains me considerably. No, no, it is nothing really—the turned ankle that is all. In a few minutes all will be well. But if you could help me, Hastings—you and Mademoiselle between you, if she will be so very kind. I am ashamed to ask it of her."

With me on the one side and the girl on the other we soon settled Poirot in a chair on the terrace. I then suggested fetching a doctor, but this my friend negatived sharply.

"It is nothing, I tell you. The ankle turned, that is all. Painful for the moment, but soon over." He made a grimace. "See in a little minute I shall have forgotten. Mademoiselle, I thank you a thousand times. You were most kind. Sit down, I beg of you."

The girl took a chair.

"It's nothing," she said. "But I wish you would let it be seen to."

"Mademoiselle, I assure you, it is a *bagatelle!* In the pleasure of your society the pain passes already."

The girl laughed.

"That's good."

"What about a cocktail?" I suggested. "It's just about the time."

"Well—" she hesitated, "thanks very much."

"Martini?"

"Yes, please—dry Martini."

I went off. On my return, after having ordered the drinks, I found Poirot and the girl engaged in animated conversation.

"Imagine, Hastings," he said, "that house there—the one on the point—that we have admired so much, it belongs to Mademoiselle here."

"Indeed?" I said though I was unable to recall having expressed any admiration. In fact I had hardly noticed the house. "It looks rather eerie and imposing standing there by itself far from anything."

"It's called End House," said the girl. "I love it—but it's a tumble-down old place. Going to rack and ruin."

"You are the last of an old family, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh! we're nothing important. But there have been Buckleys here for two or three hundred years. My brother died three years ago, so I'm the last of the family."

"That is sad. You live there alone, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh! I'm away a good deal and when I'm at home there's usually a cheery crowd coming and going."

"That is so modern. Me, I was picturing you in a dark mysterious mansion, haunted by a family curse."

"How marvellous! What a picturesque imagination you must have. No, it's not haunted. Or if so, the ghost is a beneficent one. I've had three escapes from sudden death in as many days so I must bear a charmed life."

Poirot sat up alertly.

"Escapes from death? That sounds interesting, Mademoiselle."

"Oh! they weren't very thrilling. Just accidents, you know." She jerked her head sharply as a wasp flew past. "Curse these wasps. There must be a nest of them round here."

"The bees and the wasps—you do not like them, Mademoiselle? You have been stung—yes?"

"No—but I hate the way they come right past your face."

"The bee in the bonnet," said Poirot, "your English phrase."

At that moment the cocktails arrived. We all held up our glasses and made the usual inane observations.

"I'm due in the Hotel for cocktails really," said Miss Buckley. "I expect they're wondering what has become of me."

Poirot cleared his throat and set down his glass.

"Ah! for a cup of good rich chocolate," he murmured. "But in England they make it not. Still, in England you have some very pleasing customs. The young girls, their hats they come on and off—so prettily—so easily—"

The girl stared at him.

"What do you mean? Why shouldn't they?"

"You ask that because you are young—so young, Mademoiselle. But to me the natural thing seems to have a coiffure high and rigid—so—and the hat attached with many hatpins—là—là—là et là."

He executed four vicious jabs in the air.

"But how frightfully uncomfortable!"

"Ah! I should think so," said Poirot. No martyred lady could have spoken with more feeling. "When the wind blew it was the agony—it gave you the *migraine.*"

Miss Buckley dragged off the simple wide-brimmed felt she was wearing and cast it down beside her.

"And now we do this," she laughed.

"Which is sensible and charming," said Poirot with a little bow.

I looked at her with interest. Her dark hair was ruffled and gave her an elfin look. There was something elfin about her altogether. The small vivid face, pansy shaped, the enormous dark blue eyes, and something else—something haunting and arresting. Was it a hint of recklessness? There were dark shadows under the eyes.

The terrace on which we were sitting was a little used one. The main terrace where most people sat was just round the corner at a point where the cliff shelved directly down to the sea.

From round this corner now there appeared a man, a red-faced man with a rolling carriage who carried his hands half clenched by his side. There was something breezy and carefree about him—a typical sailor.

"I can't think where the girl's got to," he was saying in tones that easily carried to where we sat. "Nick—Nick."

Miss Buckley rose.

"I knew they'd be getting in a state. Attaboy—George—here I am."

"Freddie's frantic for a drink. Come on, girl."

He cast a glance of frank curiosity at Poirot who must have differed considerably from most of Nick's friends.

The girl performed a wave of introduction.

"This is Commander Challenger—er—"

But to my surprise Poirot did not supply the name for which she was waiting. Instead he rose, bowed very ceremoniously and murmured:

"Of the English Navy. I have a great regard for the English Navy."

This type of remark is not one that an Englishman acclaims most readily. Commander Challenger flushed and Nick Buckley took command of the situation.

"Come on, George. Don't gape. Let's find Freddie and Jim."

She smiled at Poirot.

"Thanks for the cocktail. I hope the ankle will be all right."

With a nod to me she slipped her hand through the sailor's arm and they disappeared round the corner together.

"So that is one of Mademoiselle's friends," murmured Poirot thoughtfully. "One of her cheery crowd. What about him? Give me your expert judgment Hastings. Is he what you call a good Give me your expert judgment Hastings. Is he what you would call a good fellow—yes?"

Pausing for a moment to try and decide exactly what Poirot thought I should mean by a "good fellow" I gave a doubtful assent.

"He seems all right—yes," I said. "So far as one can tell by a cursory glance."

"I wonder," said Poirot.

The girl had left her hat behind. Poirot stooped to pick it up and twirled it round absentmindedly on his finger.

"Has he a *tendresse* for her? What do you think, Hastings?"

"My dear Poirot! How can I tell? Here—give me that hat. The lady will want it. I'll take it to her."

Poirot paid no attention to my request. He continued to revolve the hat slowly on his finger.

"Pas encore. Ça m'amuse."

"Really, Poirot!"

"Yes, my friend, I grow old and childish, do I not?"

This was so exactly what I was feeling that I was somewhat disconcerted to have it put into words. Poirot gave a little chuckle, then leaning forward he laid a finger against the side of his nose.

"But no—I am not so completely imbecile as you think! We will return the hat—but assuredly—but later. We will return it to End House and thus we shall have the opportunity of seeing the charming Miss Nick again."

"Poirot," I said. "I believe you have fallen in love."

"She is a pretty girl—eh?"

"Well—you saw for yourself. Why ask me?"

"Because alas! I cannot judge. To me, nowadays, anything young is beautiful. *Jeunesse—jeunesse.* . . . It is the tragedy of my years. But you —I appeal to you? Your judgment is not up to date, naturally, having lived in the Argentine so long. You admire the figure of five years ago, but you are at any rate more modern than I am. She is pretty—yes? She has the appeal to the sexes?"

"One sex is sufficient, Poirot. The answer, I should say, is very much in the affirmative. Why are you so interested in the lady?"

"Am I interested?"

"Well—look at what you've just been saying."

"You are under a misapprehension, *mon ami.* I may be interested in the lady—yes—but I am much more interested in her hat."

I stared at him, but he appeared perfectly serious.

He nodded his head at me.

"Yes, Hastings, this very hat." He held it towards me. "You see the reason for my interest?"

"It's a nice hat," I said bewildered. "But quite an ordinary hat. Lots of girls have hats like it."

"Not like this one."

I looked at it more closely.

"You see, Hastings?"

"A perfectly plain fawn felt. Good style—"

"I did not ask you to describe the hat. It is plain that you do *not* see. Almost incredible, my poor Hastings, how you hardly ever *do* see! It amazes me every time anew! But regard, my dear old imbecile—it is not necessary to employ the grey cells—the eyes will do. Regard—regard—"

And then at last I saw to what he had been trying to draw my attention. The slowly turning hat was revolving on his finger, and that finger was stuck neatly through a hole in the brim of the hat. When he saw that I had realized his meaning, he drew his finger out and held the hat towards me. It was a small neat hole, quite round and I could not imagine its purpose, if purpose it had.

"Did you observe the way Mademoiselle Nick flinched when a bee flew past? The bee in the bonnet—the hole in the hat."

"But a bee couldn't make a hole like that."

"Exactly, Hastings! What acumen! It could not. But a bullet could, *mon cher!*"

"A bullet?"

"Mais oui! A bullet like this."

He held out his hand with a small object in the palm of it.

"A spent bullet, *mon ami.* It was that which hit the terrace just now when we were talking. A spent bullet!"

"You mean—?"

"I mean that one inch of difference and that hole would be not through the hat but through the head. Now do you see why I am interested, Hastings? You were right, my friend, when you told me not to use the word 'impossible.' Yes—one is human! Ah! but he made a grave mistake, that would-be murderer, when he shot at his victim within a dozen yards of Hercule Poirot! For him, it is indeed *la mauvaise chance.* But you see now why we must make our entry into End House and get into touch with Mademoiselle? Three near escapes from death in three days. That is what she said. We must act quickly, Hastings. The peril is very close at hand."

CHAPTER II

END HOUSE

"POIROT," I said. "I have been thinking."

"An admirable exercise, my friend. Continue it."

We were sitting facing each other at lunch at a small table in the window.

"This shot must have been fired quite close to us. And yet we did not hear it."

"And you think that in the peaceful stillness, with the rippling waves the only sound, we should have done so?"

"Well, it's odd."

"No, it is not odd. Some sounds—you get used to them so soon that you hardly notice they are there. All this morning, my friend, speed boats have been making trips in the bay. You complained at first—soon, you did not even notice. But, *ma foi,* you could fire a machine gun almost and not notice it when one of those boats is on the sea."

"Yes, that's true."

"Ah! voilà," murmured Poirot. "Mademoiselle and her friends. They are to lunch here, it seems. And therefore I must return the hat. But no matter. The affair is sufficiently serious to warrant a visit all on its own."

He leaped up nimbly from his seat, hurried across the room, and presented the hat with a bow just as Miss Buckley and her companions were seating themselves at table.

They were a party of four, Nick Buckley, Commander Challenger, another man and another girl. From where we sat we had a very imperfect view of them. From time to time the Naval man's laugh boomed out. He seemed a simple likeable soul, and I had already taken a fancy to him.

My friend was silent and distrait during our meal. He crumbled his bread, made strange little ejaculations to himself and straightened everything on the table. I tried to talk but meeting with no encouragement soon gave it up.

He continued to sit on the table long after he had finished his cheese. As soon as the other party had left the room, however he too rose to his feet. They were just settling themselves at a table in the lounge when Poirot marched up to them in his most military fashion, and addressed Nick directly.

"Mademoiselle, may I crave one little word with you."

The girl frowned. I realized her feelings clearly enough. She was afraid that this queer little foreigner was going to be a nuisance. I could not but sympathize with her, knowing how it must appear in her eyes. Rather unwillingly she moved a few steps aside.

Almost immediately I saw an expression of surprise pass over her face at the low hurried words Poirot was uttering.

In the meantime, I was feeling rather awkward and ill at ease. Challenger with ready tact came to my rescue, offering me a cigarette and making some commonplace observation. We had taken each other's measure and were inclined to be sympathetic to each other. I fancied that I was more his own kind than the man with whom he had been lunching. I now had the opportunity of observing the latter. A tall, fair, rather exquisite young man, with a somewhat fleshy nose and over emphasized good looks. He had a supercilious manner and a tired drawl. There was a sleekness about him that I especially disliked.

Then I looked at the woman. She was sitting straight opposite me in a big chair and had just thrown off her hat. She was an unusual type—a weary Madonna describes it best. She had fair, almost colourless hair, parted in the middle and drawn straight down over her ears to a knot in the neck. Her face was dead white and emaciated—yet curiously attractive. Her eyes were very light grey with large pupils. She had a curious look of detachment. She was staring at me. Suddenly she spoke.

"Sit down—till your friend has finished with Nick."

She had an affected voice, languid and artificial—yet which had withal a curious attraction—a kind of resonant lingering beauty. She impressed me, I think, as the most tired person I had ever met. Tired in mind, not in body, as though she had found everything in the world to be empty and valueless.

"Miss Buckley very kindly helped my friend when he twisted his ankle this morning," I explained, as I accepted her offer.

"So Nick said." Her eyes considered me, still detachedly. "Nothing wrong with his ankle now, is there?"

I felt myself blushing.

"Just a momentary sprain," I explained.

"Oh! well—I'm glad to hear Nick didn't invent the whole thing. She's the most heaven sent little liar that ever existed, you know. Amazing—it's quite a gift."

I hardly knew what to say. My discomfiture seemed to amuse her.

"She's one of my oldest friends," she said "and I always think loyalty's such a tiresome virtue, don't you? Principally practised by the Scotch—

like thrift and keeping the Sabbath. But Nick is a liar, isn't she, Jim? That marvellous story about the brakes of the car—and Jim says there was nothing in it at all."

The fair man said in a soft rich voice.

"I know something about cars."

He half turned his head. Outside amongst other cars was a long red car. It seemed longer and redder than any car could be. It had a long gleaming bonnet of polished metal. A super car!

"Is that your car?" I asked on a sudden impulse.

He nodded.

"Yes."

I had an insane desire to say "It would be!"

Poirot rejoined us at that moment. I rose, he took me by the arm, gave a quick bow to the party and drew me rapidly away.

"It is arranged, my friend. We are to call on Mademoiselle at End House at half past six. She will be returned from the motoring by then. Yes, yes, surely she will have returned—in safety."

His face was anxious and his tone was worried.

"What did you say to her?"

"I asked her to accord me an interview—as soon as possible. She was a little unwilling—naturally. She thinks—I can see the thoughts passing through her mind—'Who is he—this little man? Is he the bounder, the upstart, the Moving Picture director?' If she could have refused she would—but it is difficult—asked like that on the spur of the moment it is easier to consent. She admits that she will be back by six thirty. *Ça y est!*"

I remarked that that seemed to be all right then, but my remark met with little favour. Indeed Poirot was as jumpy as the proverbial cat. He walked about our sitting-room all the afternoon, murmuring to himself and ceaselessly rearranging and straightening the ornaments. When I spoke to him, he waved his hands and shook his head.

In the end we started out from the Hotel at barely six o'clock.

"It seems incredible," I remarked as we descended the steps of the terrace, "to attempt to shoot anyone in a hotel garden. Only a madman would do such a thing."

"I disagree with you. Given one condition, it would be quite a reasonably safe affair. To begin with the garden is deserted. The people who come to hotels are like a flock of sheep. It is customary to sit on the terrace overlooking the bay—*eh bien* so everyone sits on the terrace. Only I who am an original, sit overlooking the garden. And even then, I *saw* nothing. There is plenty of cover, you observe—trees, groups of palms, flowering shrubs. Anyone could hide himself comfortably and be unobserved whilst he waited for Mademoiselle to pass this way. And she would come this way. To come round by the road from End House would be much longer. Mademoiselle Nick Buckley, she would be of those who are always late and taking the short cut!"

"All the same, the risk was enormous. He might have been seen—and you can't make shooting look like an accident."

"Not like an accident—no."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing—a little idea. I may or may not be justified. Leaving it aside for a moment, there is what I mentioned just now—an essential condition."

"Which is?"

"Surely you can tell me, Hastings."

"I wouldn't like to deprive you of the pleasure of being clever at my expense!"

"Oh! the sarcasm! The irony! Well, what leaps to the eye is this: the motive cannot be obvious. If it were—why then truly the risk would indeed be too great to be taken! People would say: 'I wonder if it were So and So. Where was So and So when the shot was fired?' No, the murderer—the would-be murderer, I should say—cannot be obvious. And that, Hastings, is why I am afraid! Yes, at this minute I am afraid. I reassure myself. I say —'There are four of them.' I say—'Nothing can happen when they are all together.' I say—'It would be madness!' And all the time I am afraid. These 'accidents'—I want to hear about them!"

He turned back abruptly.

"It is still early. We will go the other way by the road. The garden has nothing to tell us. Let us inspect the orthodox approach to End House."

Our way led out of the front gate of the Hotel, up a sharp hill to the right, and at the top of it a small lane with a notice on the wall TO END HOUSE ONLY.

We followed it and after a few hundred yards the lane gave an abrupt turn and ended in a pair of dilapidated entrance gates, which would have been the better for a coat of paint.

Inside the gates, to the right, was a small lodge. This lodge presented a piquant contrast to the gates and to the condition of the grass-grown drive. The small garden round it was spick and span, the window frames and sashes had been lately painted and there were clean bright curtains at the windows.

Bending over a flower bed was a man in a faded Norfolk jacket. He straightened up as the gate creaked and turned to look at us. He was a man of about sixty, six foot at least with a powerful frame and a weather-beaten face. His head was almost completely bald. His eyes were a vivid blue and twinkled. He seemed a genial soul.

"Good-afternoon," he observed as we passed.

I responded in kind, and as we went on up the drive I was conscious of those blue eyes raking our backs inquisitively.

"I wonder," said Poirot thoughtfully.

He left it at that without vouchsafing any explanation of what it was that he wondered.

The house itself was large and rather dreary looking. It was shut in by trees, the branches of which actually touched the roof. It was clearly in bad repair. Poirot swept it with an appraising glance before ringing the bell —an old-fashioned bell that needed a Herculean pull to produce any effect and which once started, echoed mournfully on and on.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman—"a decent woman in black"—so I felt she should be described. Very respectable, rather mournful, completely uninterested.

Miss Buckley, she said, had not yet returned. Poirot explained that we had an appointment. He had some little difficulty in gaining his point, she was the type that is apt to be suspicious of foreigners. Indeed I flatter myself that it was my appearance which turned the scale. We were admitted and ushered into the drawing-room to await Miss Buckley's return.

There was no mournful note here. The room gave on the sea and was full of sunshine. It was shabby and betrayed conflicting styles—ultra modern of a cheap variety superimposed on solid Victorian. The curtains were of faded brocade, but the covers were new and gay and the cushions were positively hectic. On the walls were hung family portraits. Some of them, I thought looked remarkably good. There was a gramophone and some records lying idly about. There was a portable wireless, practically no books and one newspaper flung open on the end of the sofa. Poirot picked it up—then laid it down with a grimace. It was the St. Loo Weekly Herald and Directory. Something impelled him to pick it up a second time and he was glancing at a column when the door opened and Nick Buckley came into the room.

"Bring the ice, Ellen," she called over her shoulder, then addressed herself to us.

"Well, here I am—and I've shaken off the others. I'm devoured with curiosity. Am I the long lost heroine that is badly wanted for the Talkies? You were so very solemn" (she addressed herself to Poirot) "that I feel it can't be anything else. Do make me a handsome offer."

"Alas! Mademoiselle—" began Poirot.

"Don't say it's the opposite," she begged him. "Don't say you paint miniatures and want me to buy one. But no—with that moustache and staying at the Majestic which has the nastiest food and the highest prices in England—no, it simply can't be."

The woman who had opened the door to us came into the room with ice and a tray of bottles. Nick mixed cocktails expertly, continuing to talk. I think at last Poirot's silence (so unlike him) impressed itself upon her. She stopped in the very act of filling the glasses and said sharply:

"Well?"

"That is what I wish it to be—well, Mademoiselle." He took the cocktail from her hand. "To your good health, Mademoiselle—to your continued good health." The girl was no fool. The significance of his tone was not lost on her.

"Is—anything the matter?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle. This . . ."

He held out his hand to her with the bullet on the palm of it. She picked it up with a puzzled frown.

"You know what that is?"

"Yes, of course I know. It's a bullet."

"Exactly. Mademoiselle—it was not a wasp that flew past your face this morning—it was this bullet."

"Do you mean—was some criminal idiot shooting bullets in a hotel garden?"

"It would seem so."

"Well, I'm damned," said Nick frankly. "I do seem to bear a charmed life. That's number four."

"Yes," said Poirot. "That is number four. I want, Mademoiselle, to hear about the other three—accidents."

She stared at him.

"I want to be very sure, Mademoiselle, that they were—accidents."

"Why, of course! What else could they be?"

"Mademoiselle, prepare yourself, I beg, for a great shock. What if someone is attempting your life?"

All Nick's response to this was a burst of laughter. The idea seemed to amuse her hugely.

"What a marvellous idea! My dear man, who on earth do you think would attempt my life? I'm not the beautiful young heiress whose death releases millions. I wish somebody was trying to kill me—that would be a thrill if you like—but I'm afraid there's not a hope!"

"Will you tell me, Mademoiselle, about those accidents?"

"Of course—but there's nothing in it. They were just stupid things. There's a heavy picture hangs over my bed. It fell in the night. Just by pure chance I had happened to hear a door banging somewhere in the house and went down to find it and shut it—and so I escaped. It would probably have bashed my head in. That's No. 1."

Poirot did not smile.

"Continue, Mademoiselle. Let us pass to No. 2."

"Oh! that's weaker still. There's a scrambly cliff path down to the sea. I go down that way to bathe. There's a rock you can dive off. A boulder got dislodged somehow and came roaring down just missing me. The third thing was quite different. Something went wrong with the brakes of the car —I don't know quite what—the garage man explained but I didn't follow it. Anyway if I'd gone through the gate and down that hill, they wouldn't have held and I suppose I'd have gone slap into the Town Hall and there would have been the devil of a smash. Slight defacement of the Town Hall, complete obliteration of Me. But owing to my always leaving something behind, I turned back and merely ran into the laurel hedge."

"And you cannot tell me what the trouble was?"

"You can go and ask them at Mott's Garage. They'll know. It was something quite simple and mechanical that had been unscrewed, I think. I wondered if Ellen's boy—(my stand-by who opened the door to you, has got a small boy)—had tinkered with it. Boys do like messing about with cars. Of course Ellen swore he'd never been near the car. I think something must just have worked loose in spite of what Mott said."

"Where is your garage, Mademoiselle?"

"Round the other side of the house."

"Is it kept locked?"

Nick's eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh! no. Of course not."

"Anyone could tamper with the car unobserved?"

"Well—yes—I suppose so. But it's so silly."

"No, Mademoiselle. It is not silly. You do not understand. You are in danger—grave danger. I tell it to you. I! And you do not know who I am?"

"No?" said Nick breathlessly.

"I am Hercule Poirot."

"Oh!" said Nick in rather a flat tone. "Oh! yes."

"You know my name, eh?"

"Oh! yes."

She wriggled uncomfortably. A hunted look came into her eyes. Poirot observed her keenly.

"You are not at ease. That means, I suppose, that you have not read my books."

"Well—no—not all of them. But I know the name, of course."

"Mademoiselle, you are a polite little liar." (I started, remembering the words spoken at the Majestic Hotel that day after lunch.) "I forget—you are only a child—you would not have heard. So quickly does fame pass. My friend there—he will tell you."

Nick looked at me. I cleared my throat, somewhat embarrassed.

"Monsieur Poirot is—er—was—a great detective," I explained.

"Ah! my friend," cried Poirot. "Is that all you can find to say? *Mais dis donc!* Say then to Mademoiselle that I am a detective unique, unsurpassed, the greatest that ever lived!"

"That is now unnecessary," I said coldly. "You have told her yourself."

"Ah! yes, but it is more agreeable to have been able to preserve the modesty. One should not sing one's own praises."

"One should not keep a dog and have to bark oneself," agreed Nick with mock sympathy. "Who is the dog, by the way? Dr. Watson, I presume."

"My name is Hastings," I said coldly.

"Battle of—1066," said Nick. "Who said I wasn't educated? Well, this is all too, too marvellous! Do you think someone really wants to do away with me? It would be thrilling. But of course that sort of thing doesn't really happen. Only in books. I expect Monsieur Poirot is like a surgeon who's invented an operation or a doctor who's found an obscure disease and wants everyone to have it."

"Sacré tonnerre!" thundered Poirot. "Will you be serious? You young people of today, will nothing make you serious? It would not have been a joke, Mademoiselle, if you had been lying in the hotel garden a pretty little corpse with a nice little hole through your head instead of your hat. You would not have laughed then—eh?"

"Unearthly laughter heard at a séance," said Nick. "But seriously, Monsieur Poirot—it's very kind of you and all that—but the whole thing must be an accident."

"You are as obstinate as the devil!"

"That's where I get my name from. My grandfather was popularly supposed to have sold his soul to the devil. Everyone round here called him Old Nick. He was a wicked old man—but great fun. I adored him. I went everywhere with him and so they called us Old Nick and Young Nick. My real name is Magdala."

"That is an uncommon name."

"Yes, it's a kind of family one. There have been lots of Magdalas in the Buckley family. There's one up there." She nodded at a picture on the wall.

"Ah!" said Poirot. Then looking at a portrait hanging over the mantelpiece he said:

"Is that your grandfather, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, rather an arresting portrait, isn't it? Jim Lazarus offered to buy it, but I wouldn't sell. I've got an affection for Old Nick."

"Ah!" Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said very earnestly: *"Revenons à nos moutons.* Listen, Mademoiselle. I implore you to be serious. You are in danger. Today, somebody shot at you with a Mauser pistol—"

"A Mauser pistol?"

For the moment she was startled.

"Yes, why? Do you know of anyone who has a Mauser pistol?"

She smiled.

"I've got one myself."

"You have?"

"Yes—it was Dad's. He brought it back from the War. It's been knocking round here ever since. I saw it only the other day in that drawer."

She had indicated an old-fashioned bureau. Now, as though suddenly struck by an idea, she crossed to it and pulled the drawer open. She turned rather blankly. Her voice held a new note.

"Oh!" she said. "It's—it's gone."

CHAPTER III

ACCIDENTS?

IT WAS from that moment that the conversation took on a different tone. Up to now, Poirot and the girl had been at cross purposes. They were separated by a gulf of years. His fame and reputation meant nothing to her—she was of the generation that knows only the great names of the immediate moment. She was, therefore, unimpressed by his warnings. He was to her only a rather comic elderly foreigner with an amusingly melodramatic mind.

And this attitude baffled Poirot. To begin with, his vanity suffered. It was his constant dictum that all the world knew Hercule Poirot. Here was someone who did not. Very good for him, I could not but feel—but not precisely helpful to the object in view!

With the discovery of the missing pistol, however, the affair took on a new phase. Nick ceased to treat it as a mildly amusing joke. She still treated the matter lightly, because it was her habit and her creed to treat all occurrences lightly, but there was a distinct difference in her manner.

She came back and sat down on the arm of a chair frowning thoughtfully.

"That's odd," she said.

Poirot whirled round on me.

"You remember, Hastings, the little idea I mentioned? Well, it was correct, my little idea! Supposing Mademoiselle had been found shot lying in the hotel garden? She might not have been found for some hours—few people pass that way. And beside her hand—just fallen from it—is her own pistol— Doubtless the good Madame Ellen would identify it. There would be suggestions, no doubt, of worry or of sleeplessness—"

Nick moved uneasily.

"That's true. I have been worried to death. Everybody's been telling me I'm nervy. Yes—they'd say all that . . ."

"And bring in a verdict of suicide. Mademoiselle's fingerprints conveniently on the pistol and nobody else's—but yes, it would be very simple and convincing."

"How terribly amusing!" said Nick, but not, I was glad to note, as though she were terribly amused.

Poirot accepted her words in the conventional sense in which they were uttered.

"N'est ce pas? But you understand, Mademoiselle, there must be no more of this. Four failures—yes—but the fifth time there may be a success."

"Bring out your rubber-tired hearses," murmured Nick.

"But we are here, my friend and I, to obviate all that!"

I felt grateful for the we. Poirot has a habit of sometimes ignoring my existence.

"Yes," I put in. "You mustn't be alarmed, Miss Buckley. We will protect you."

"How frightfully nice of you," said Nick. "I think the whole thing is perfectly marvellous. Too, too thrilling."

She still preserved her airy detached manner, but her eyes, I thought, looked troubled.

"And the first thing to do," said Poirot "is to have the consultation."

He sat down and beamed upon her in a friendly manner.

"To begin with, Mademoiselle, a conventional question—but—have you any enemies?"

Nick shook her head rather regretfully.

"I'm afraid not," she said apologetically.

"Bon. We will dismiss that possibility then. And now we ask the question of the Cinema, of the detective novel—who profits by your death, Mademoiselle?"

"I can't imagine," said Nick. "That's why it all seems such nonsense. There's this beastly old barn, of course, but it's mortgaged up to the hilt, the roof leaks and there can't be a coal mine or anything exciting like that hidden in the cliff."

"It is mortgaged—*hein?"*

"Yes. I had to mortgage it. You see there were two lots of death duties—quite soon after each other. First my grandfather died—just six years ago, and then my brother. That just about put the lid on the financial position."

"And your father?"

"He was invalided home from the War, then got pneumonia and died in 1919. My mother died when I was a baby. I lived here with Grandfather. He and Dad didn't get on (I don't wonder), so Dad found it convenient to park me and go roaming the world on his own account. Gerald—that was my brother—didn't get on with Grandfather either. I dare say I shouldn't have got on with him if I'd been a boy. Being a girl saved me. Grandfather used to say I was a chip of the old block and had inherited his spirit." She laughed. "He was an awful old rip, I believe. But frightfully lucky. There was a saying round here that everything he touched turned to gold. He was a gambler, though, and gambled it away again. When he died he left hardly anything beside the house and land. I was sixteen when he died and Gerald was twenty-two. Gerald was killed in a motor accident just three years ago and the place came to me."

"And after you, Mademoiselle? Who is your nearest relation?"

"My cousin, Charles. Charles Vyse. He's a lawyer down here. Quite good and worthy but very dull. He gives me good advice and tries to restrain my extravagant tastes."

"He manages your affairs for you—eh?"

"Well—yes, if you like to put it that way. I haven't many affairs to manage. He arranged the mortgage for me and made me let the lodge."

"Ah!—the lodge. I was going to ask you about that. It is let?"

"Yes—to some Australians. Croft their name is. Very hearty, you know—and all that sort of thing. Simply oppressively kind. Always bringing up sticks of celery and early peas and things like that. They're shocked at the way I let the garden go. They're rather a nuisance really—at least he is. Too terribly friendly for words. She's a cripple, poor thing and lies on a sofa all day. Anyway they pay the rent and that's the great thing."

"How long have they been here?"

"Oh! about six months."

"I see. Now beyond this cousin of yours—on your father's side or your mother's by the way?"

"Mother's. My mother was Amy Vyse."

"Bien!—Now beyond this cousin, as I was saying, have you any other relatives?"

"Some very distant cousins in Yorkshire—Buckleys."

"No one else?"

"No."

"That is lonely."

Nick stared at him.

"Lonely? What a funny idea. I'm not down here much, you know. I'm usually in London. Relations are too devastating as a rule. They fuss and interfere. It's much more fun to be on one's own."

"I will not waste the sympathy. You are a modern, I see, Mademoiselle. Now—your household."

"How grand that sounds! Ellen's the household. And her husband who's a sort of gardener—not a very good one. I pay them frightfully little because I let them have the child here. Ellen does for me when I'm down here and if I have a party we get in who and what we can to help. I'm giving a party on Monday. It's Regatta week, you know."

"Monday—and today is Saturday. Yes. Yes. And now, Mademoiselle, your friends—the ones with whom you were lunching today, for instance?"

"Well, Freddie Rice—the fair girl—is practically my greatest friend. She's had a rotten life. Married to a beast of a man who drank and drugged and was altogether a queer of the worst description. She had to leave him a year or two ago. Since then she's drifted round. I wish to goodness she'd get a divorce and marry Jim Lazarus."

"Lazarus? The art dealer in Bond Street?"

"Yes. Jim's the only son. Rolling in money, of course. Did you see that car of his? He's a Jew, of course, but a frightfully decent one. And he's devoted to Freddie. They go about everywhere together. They are staying at the Majestic over the week-end and are coming to me on Monday."

"And Mrs Rice's husband?"

"The mess? Oh! he's dropped out of everything. Nobody knows where he is. It makes it horribly awkward for Freddie. You can't divorce a man when you don't know where he is."

"Évidément!"

"Poor Freddie," said Nick pensively. "She's had rotten luck. The thing was all fixed once. She got hold of him and put it to him, and he said he was perfectly willing, but he simply hadn't got the cash to take a woman to a Hotel. So the end of it all was she forked out—and he took it and off he went and has never been heard of from that day to this. Pretty mean, I call it."

"Good heavens," I exclaimed.

"My friend Hastings is shocked," remarked Poirot. "You must be more careful, Mademoiselle. He is out of date, you comprehend. He has just returned from those great clear open spaces etc. and he has yet to learn the language of nowadays."

"Well, there's nothing to get shocked about," said Nick opening her eyes very wide. "I mean, everybody knows, don't they, that there are such people. But I call it a low down trick all the same. Poor old Freddie was so damned hard up at the time that she didn't know where to turn."

"Yes, yes, not a very pretty affair. And your other friend, Mademoiselle. The good Commander Challenger?"

"George? I've known George all my life—well, for the last five years anyway. He's a good scout, George."

"He wishes you to marry him—eh?"

"He does mention it now and again. In the small hours of the morning or after the second glass of port."

"But you remain hard-hearted."

"What would be the use of George and me marrying one another? We've neither of us got a bean. And one would get terribly bored with George. That 'playing for one's side' 'good old school' manner. After all, he's forty if he's a day."

The remark made me wince slightly.

"In fact he has one foot in the grave," said Poirot. "Oh! do not mind me, Mademoiselle. I am a grandpapa—a nobody. And now, tell me more about these accidents. The picture, for instance?"

"It's been hung up again—on a new cord. You can come and see it if you like."

She led the way out of the room and we followed her. The picture in question was an oil painting in a heavy frame. It hung directly over the bed-head.

With a murmured "You permit, Mademoiselle," Poirot removed his shoes and mounted upon the bed. He examined the picture and the cord and gingerly tested the weight of the painting. With an eloquent grimace he descended.

"To have that descend on one's head—no, it would not be pretty. The cord by which it was hung, Mademoiselle, was it, like this one, a wire cable?"

"Yes, but not so thick. I got a thicker one this time."

"That is comprehensible. And you examined the break—the edges were frayed?"

"I think so—but I didn't notice particularly. Why should I?"

"Exactly. As you say, why should you? All the same, I should much like to look at that piece of wire. Is it about the house anywhere?"

"It was still on the picture. I expect the man who put the new wire on just threw the old one away."

"A pity. I should like to have seen it."

"You don't think it was just an accident after all? Surely it couldn't have been anything else."

"It may have been an accident. It is impossible to say. But the damage to the brakes of your car—that was not an accident. And the stone that rolled down the cliff—I should like to see the spot where that accident occurred."

Nick took us out in the garden and led us to the cliff edge. The sea glittered blue below us. A rough path led down the face of the rock. Nick described just where the accident occurred and Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked:

"How many ways are there into your garden, Mademoiselle?"

"There's the front way—past the lodge. And a tradesman's entrance—a door in the wall half-way up that lane. Then there's a gate just along here on the cliff edge. It leads out onto a zigzag path that leads up from that beach to the Majestic Hotel. And then of course you can go straight through a gap in the hedge into the Majestic garden—that's the way I went this morning. To go through the Majestic garden is a short cut to the town anyway."

"And your gardener—where does he usually work?"

"Well, he usually potters round the kitchen garden, or else he sits in the potting shed and pretends to be sharpening the shears."

"Round the other side of the house, that is to say?"

"Yes."

"So that if anyone were to come in here and dislodge a boulder he would be very unlikely to be noticed."

Nick gave a sudden little shiver.

"Do you—do you really think that is what happened?" she asked. "I can't believe it somehow. It seems so perfectly futile."

Poirot drew the bullet from his pocket again and looked at it.

"That was not futile, Mademoiselle," he said gently.

"It must have been some madman."

"Possibly. It is an interesting subject of after dinner conversation—are all criminals really madmen? There may be a malformation in their little grey cells—yes, it is very likely. That, it is the affair of the doctor. For me—I have different work to perform. I have the innocent to think of, not the guilty—the victim, not the criminal. It is you I am considering now, Mademoiselle, not your unknown assailant. You are young and beautiful, and the sun shines and the world is pleasant, and there is life and love ahead of you. It is all that of which I think, Mademoiselle. Tell me, these friends of yours, Mrs Rice and Mr Lazarus—they have been down here, how long?"

"Freddie came down on Wednesday to this part of the world. She stopped with some people near Tavistock for a couple of nights. She came on here yesterday. Jim has been touring round about, I believe."

"And Commander Challenger?"

"He's at Devonport. He comes over in his car whenever he can—weekends mostly."

Poirot nodded. We were walking back to the house. There was a silence and then he said suddenly:

"Have you a friend whom you can trust, Mademoiselle?"

"There's Freddie."

"Other than Mrs Rice."

"Well, I don't know. I suppose I have. Why?"

"Because I want you to have a friend to stay with you—immediately."

"Oh!"

Nick seemed rather taken aback. She was silent a moment or two thinking. Then she said doubtfully:

"There's Maggie. I could get hold of her, I expect."

"Who is Maggie?"

"One of my Yorkshire cousins. There's a large family of them. He's a clergyman, you know. Maggie's about my age and I usually have her to stay sometime or other in the summer. She's no fun, though—one of those painfully pure girls, with the kind of hair that has just become fashionable by accident. I was hoping to get out of having her this year."

"Not at all. Your cousin, Mademoiselle, will do admirably. Just the type of person I had in mind."

"All right," said Nick with a sigh. "I'll wire her. I certainly don't know who else I could get hold of just now. Everyone's fixed up. But if it isn't the Choirboys' Outing or the Mothers' Beanfeast she'll come all right. Though what you expect her to do."

"Could you arrange for her to sleep in your room?"

"I suppose so."

"She would not think that an odd request?"

"Oh! no, Maggie never thinks. She just does—earnestly, you know. Christian works—with faith and perseverance. All right I'll wire her to come on Monday."

"Why not tomorrow?"

"With Sunday trains? She'll think I'm dying if I suggest that. No, I'll say Monday. Are you going to tell her about the awful fate hanging over me?"

"Nous verrons. You still make a jest of it? You have courage, I am glad to see."

"It makes a diversion anyway," said Nick.

Something in her tone struck me and I glanced at her curiously. I had a feeling that there was something she had left untold. We had re-entered the drawing-room. Poirot was fingering the newspaper on the sofa.

"You read this, Mademoiselle?" he asked suddenly.

"The St. Loo Herald? Not seriously. I opened it to see the tides. It gives them every week."

"I see. By the way, Mademoiselle, have you ever made a will?"

"Yes, I did. About six months ago. Just before my op."

"Qu'est ce que vous dites? Your *op?"*

"Operation. For appendicitis. Someone said I ought to make a will, so I did. It made me feel quite important."

"And the terms of that will?"

"I left End House to Charles. I hadn't much else to leave but what there was I left to Freddie. I should think probably the what do they call them—liabilities would have exceeded the assets, really."

Poirot nodded absently.

"I will take my leave now. *Au revoir,* Mademoiselle. Be careful."

"What of?" asked Nick.

"You are intelligent. Yes, that is the weak point— In which direction are you to be careful? Who can say? But have confidence, Mademoiselle. In a few days I shall have discovered the truth."

"Until then beware of poison, bombs, revolver shots, motor accidents and arrows dipped in the secret poison of the South American Indians," finished Nick glibly.

"Do not mock yourself, Mademoiselle," said Poirot gravely.

He paused as he reached the door.

"By the way," he said. "What price did M. Lazarus offer you for the portrait of your grandfather?"

"Fifty pounds."

"Ah!" said Poirot.

He looked earnestly back at the dark saturnine face above the mantelpiece.

"But, as I told you, I don't want to sell the old boy."

"No," said Poirot thoughtfully. "No, I understand."

CHAPTER IV

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING!

"POIROT," I said as soon as we were out upon the road. "There is one thing I think you ought to know."

"And what is that, *mon ami?*"

I told him of Mrs Rice's version of the trouble with the motor.

"Tiens! C'est interessant, ça. There is, of course, a type, vain, hysterical, that seeks to make itself interesting by having marvellous escapes from death and which will recount to you surprising histories that never happened! Yes, it is well known, that type there. Such people will even do themselves grave bodily injury to sustain the fiction."

"You don't think that—"

"That Mademoiselle Nick is of that type? No, indeed. You observed, Hastings, that we had great difficulty in convincing her of her danger. And right to the end she kept up the farce of a half mocking disbelief. She is of her generation, that little one. All the same, it is interesting—what Madame Rice said. Why should she say it? Why say it even if it were true? It was unnecessary—almost *gauche."*

"Yes," I said. "That's true. She dragged it into the conversation neck and crop for no earthly reason that I could see."

"That is curious. Yes, that is curious. The little facts that are curious, I like to see them appear. They are significant. They point the way."

"The way—where?"

"You put your finger on the weak spot, my excellent Hastings. Where? Where indeed! Alas, we shall not know till we get there."

"Tell me, Poirot," I said. "Why did you insist on her getting this cousin to stay?"

Poirot stopped and waved an excited forefinger at me.

"Consider," he cried. "Consider for one little moment, Hastings. How are we handicapped! How are our hands tied! To hunt down a murderer after a crime has been committed—*c'est tout simple!* Or at least it is simple to one of my ability. The murderer has, so to speak, signed his name by committing the crime. But here there is no crime—and what is more we do not want a crime. To detect a crime before it has been committed—that is indeed of a rare difficulty.

"What is our first aim? The safety of Mademoiselle. And that is not easy. No, it is not easy, Hastings. We cannot watch over her day and night—we cannot even send a policeman in big boots to watch over her. We cannot pass the night in a young lady's sleeping chamber. The affair bristles with difficulties.

"But we can do one thing. We can make it more difficult for our assassin. We can put Mademoiselle upon her guard and we can introduce a perfectly impartial witness. It will take a very clever man to get round those two circumstances."

He paused and then said in an entirely different tone of voice.

"But what I am afraid of, Hastings—"

"Yes?"

"What I am afraid of is—that he is a very clever man. And I am not easy in my mind. No, I am not easy at all."

"Poirot," I said. "You're making me feel quite nervous."

"So am I nervous. Listen, my friend, that paper, the St. Loo Weekly Herald. It was open and folded back at—where do you think? A little paragraph which said '*Among the guests staying at the Majestic Hotel are M. Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings.*' Supposing—just supposing that someone had read that paragraph. They know my name—everyone knows my name—"

"Miss Buckley didn't," I said with a grin.

"She is a scatterbrain—she does not count. A serious man—a criminal—would know my name. And he would be afraid! He would wonder! He would ask himself questions. Three times he has attempted the life of Mademoiselle and now Hercule Poirot arrives in the neighbourhood. 'Is that coincidence?' he would ask himself. And he would fear that it might *not* be coincidence. What would he do then?"

"Lie low and hide his tracks," I suggested.

"Yes—yes—or else—if he had real audacity, he would strike quickly—without loss of time. Before I had time to make the inquiries—pouf, Mademoiselle is dead. That is what a man of audacity would do."

"But why do you think that somebody read that paragraph other than Miss Buckley?"

"It was not Miss Buckley who read that paragraph. When I mentioned my name it meant nothing to her. It was not even familiar. Her face did not change. Besides she told us—she opened the paper to look at the tides—nothing else. Well, there was no tide table on that page."

"You think someone in the house—"

"Someone in the house or who had access to it. And that last is easy—the window stands open. Without doubt Miss Buckley's friends pass in and out."

"Have you any idea? Any suspicion?"

Poirot flung out his hands.

"Nothing. Whatever the motive, it is, as I predicted, not an obvious one. That is the would-be murderer's security—that is why he could act so daringly this morning. On the face of it, no one seems to have any reason for desiring the little Nick's death. The property? End House? That passes to the cousin—but does he particularly want a heavily mortgaged and very dilapidated old house? It is not even a family place so far as he is concerned. He is not a Buckley, remember. We must see this M. Charles Vyse, certainly, but the idea seems fantastic.

"Then there is Madame—the bosom friend—with her strange eyes and her air of a lost Madonna—"

"You felt that too?" I asked startled.

"What is her concern in the business? She tells you that her friend is a liar. *C'est gentille, ça!* Why does she tell you? Is she afraid of something that Nick may say? Is that something connected with the car? Or did she use that as an instance and was her real fear of something else? Did anyone tamper with the car, and if so, who? And does she know about it?

"Then the handsome blond M. Lazarus. Where does he fit in? With his marvellous automobile and his money. Can he possibly be concerned in any way? Commander Challenger—"

"He's all right," I put in quickly. "I'm sure of that. A real pukka sahib."

"Doubtless he has been to what you consider the right school. Happily, being a foreigner, I am free from these prejudices, and can make investigations unhampered by them. But I will admit that I find it hard to connect Commander Challenger with the case. In fact I do not see that he can be so connected."

"Of course he can't," I said warmly.

Poirot looked at me meditatively.

"You have an extraordinary effect on me, Hastings. You have so strongly the *flair* in the wrong direction that I am almost tempted to go by it! You are that wholly admirable type of man, honest, credulous, honourable, who is invariably taken in by any scoundrel. You are the type of man who invests in doubtful oil fields, and non existent gold mines. From hundreds like you, the swindler makes his daily bread. Ah well—I shall study this Commander Challenger. You have awakened my doubts."

"My dear Poirot," I cried angrily. "You are perfectly absurd. A man who has knocked about the world like I have—"

"Never learns," said Poirot sadly. "It is amazing—but there it is."

"Do you suppose I'd have made a success of my ranch out in the Argentine if I was the kind of credulous fool you make out?"

"Do not enrage yourself, *mon ami.* You have made a great success of it—you and your wife."

"Bella," I said "always goes by my judgment."

"She is as wise as she is charming," said Poirot. "Let us not quarrel, my friend. See, there ahead of us, it says Mott's Garage. That, I think, is the garage mentioned by Mademoiselle Buckley. A few inquiries will soon give us the truth of that little matter."

We duly entered the place and Poirot introduced himself by explaining that he had been recommended there by Miss Buckley. He made some inquiries about hiring a car for some afternoon drives and from there slid easily into the topic of the damage sustained by Miss Buckley's car not long ago.

Immediately the garage proprietor waxed voluble. Most extraordinary thing he'd ever seen. He proceeded to be technical. I, alas, am not mechanically minded. Poirot, I should imagine, is even less so. But certain facts did emerge unmistakably. The car had been tampered with. And the damage had been something quite easily done occupying very little time.

"So that is that," said Poirot as we strolled away. "The little Nick was right, and the rich M. Lazarus was wrong. Hastings, my friend, all this is very interesting."

"What do we do now?"

"We visit the post office and send off a telegram if it is not too late."

"A telegram?" I said hopefully.

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "A telegram."

The post office was still open. Poirot wrote out his telegram and dispatched it. He vouchsafed me no information as to its contents. Feeling that he wanted me to ask him, I carefully refrained from doing so.

"It is annoying that tomorrow is Sunday," he remarked as we strolled back to the Hotel. "We cannot now call upon M. Vyse till Monday morning."

"You could get hold of him at his private address."

"Naturally. But that is just what I am anxious not to do. I would prefer in the first place, to consult him professionally and to form my judgment of him from that aspect."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "I suppose that would be best."

"The answer to one simple little question, for instance, might make a great difference. If M. Charles Vyse was in his office at twelve thirty this morning, then it was not he who fired that shot in the garden of the Majestic Hotel."

"Ought we not to examine the alibis of the three at the Hotel?"

"That is much more difficult. It would be easy enough for one of them to leave the others for a few minutes, a hasty egress from one of the innumerable windows—lounge, smoking-room, drawing-room, writing-room, quickly under cover to the spot where the girl must pass—the shot fired and a rapid retreat. But as yet, *mon ami,* we are not even sure that we have arrived at all the *dramatis personae* in the drama. There is the respectable Ellen—and her so far unseen husband. Both inmates of the house and possibly, for all we know, with a grudge against our little Mademoiselle. There are even the unknown Australians at the Lodge. And there may be others, friends and intimates of Miss Buckley's whom she has no reason for suspecting and consequently has not mentioned. I cannot help feeling, Hastings, that there is something behind this—something that has not yet come to light. I have a little idea that Miss Buckley knows more than she told us."

"You think she is keeping something back?"

"Yes."

"Possibly with an idea of shielding whoever it is?"

Poirot shook his head with the utmost energy.

"No, no. As far as that goes, she gave me the impression of being utterly frank. I am convinced that as regards these attempts on her life, she was telling all she knew. But there is something else—something that she believes has nothing to do with that at all. And I should like to know what that something is. For I—I say it in all modesty—am a great deal more intelligent than *une petite comme ça.* I, Hercule Poirot, might see a connexion where she sees none. It might give me the clue I am seeking. For I announce to you, Hastings, quite frankly and humbly, that I am as you express it, all on the sea. Until I can get some glimmering of the reason behind all this, I am in the dark. There must be something—some factor in the case that I do not grasp. What is it? *Je me demande ça sens cesse. Qu'est ce que c'est?"*

"You will find out," I said soothingly.

"So long," he said sombrely, "as I do not find out too late."

CHAPTER V

MR. AND MRS. CROFT

THERE was dancing that evening at the Hotel. Nick Buckley dined there with her friends and waved a gay greeting to us.

She was dressed that evening in floating scarlet chiffon that dragged on the floor. Out of it rose her white neck and shoulders and her small impudent dark head.

"An engaging young devil," I remarked.

"A contrast to her friend—eh?"

Frederica Rice was in white. She danced with a languorous weary grace that was as far removed from Nick's animation as anything could be.

"She is very beautiful," said Poirot suddenly.

"Who? Our Nick?"

"No—the other. Is she evil? Is she good? Is she merely unhappy? One cannot tell. She is a mystery. She is, perhaps, nothing at all. But I tell you, my friend, she is an *allumeuse.*"

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously.

He shook his head smiling.

"You will feel it sooner or later. Remember my words."

Presently to my surprise, he rose. Nick was dancing with George Challenger. Frederica and Lazarus had just stopped and had sat down at their table. Then Lazarus got up and went away. Mrs Rice was alone. Poirot went straight to her table. I followed him.

His methods were direct and to the point.

"You permit?" he laid a hand on the back of a chair then slid into it. "I am anxious to have a word with you while your friend is dancing."

"Yes?" her voice sounded cool, uninterested.

"Madame, I do not know whether your friend has told you. If not, I will. Today her life has been attempted."

Her great grey eyes widened in horror and surprise. The pupils, dilated black pupils, widened too.

"What do you mean?"

"Mademoiselle Buckley was shot at in the garden of this Hotel."

She smiled suddenly—a gentle pitying incredulous smile.

"Did Nick tell you so?"

"No, Madame, I happened to see it with my own eyes. Here is the bullet."

He held it out to her and she drew back a little.

"But then—but then—"

"It is no fantasy of Mademoiselle's imagination, you understand. I vouch for that. And there is more. Several very curious accidents have happened in the last few days. You will have heard—no, perhaps you will not. You only arrived yesterday, did you not?"

"Yes—yesterday."

"Before that you were staying with friends, I understand. At Tavistock."

"Yes."

"I wonder, Madame, what were the names of the friends with whom you were staying."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Is there any reason why I should tell you that?" she asked coldly.

Poirot was immediately all innocent surprise.

"A thousand pardons, Madame. I was most *maladroit.* But I myself, having friends at Tavistock, fancied that you might have met them there . . . Buchanan—that is the name of my friends."

Mrs Rice shook her head.

"I don't remember them. I don't think I can have met them." Her tone now was quite cordial. "Don't let us talk about boring people. Go on about Nick. Who shot at her? Why?"

"I do not know who—as yet," said Poirot. "But I shall find out. Oh! yes, I shall find out. I am, you know, a detective. Hercule Poirot is my name."

"A very famous name."

"Madame is too kind."

She said slowly:

"What do you want me to do?"

I think she surprised us both there. We had not expected just that.

"I will ask you, Madame, to watch over your friend."

"I will."

"That is all."

He got up, made a quick bow and we returned to our own table.

"Poirot," I said, "aren't you showing your hand very plainly?"

"*Mon ami,* what else can I do? It lacks subtlety, perhaps, but it makes for safety. I can take no chances. At any rate one thing emerges plain to see."

"What is that?"

"Mrs Rice was not at Tavistock. Where was she? Ah! but I will find out.

Impossible to keep information from Hercule Poirot. See—the handsome Lazarus has returned. She is telling him. He looks over at us. He is clever, that one. Note the shape of his head. Ah! I wish I knew—"

"What?" I asked as he came to a stop.

"What I shall know on Monday," he returned ambiguously.

I looked at him but said nothing. He sighed.

"You have no longer the curiosity, my friend. In the old days—"

"There are some pleasures," I said coldly, "that it is good for you to do without."

"You mean—?"

"The pleasure of refusing to answer questions."

"Ah c'est malin."

"Quite so."

"Ah well, well," murmured Poirot. "The strong silent man beloved of novelists in the Edwardian age."

His eyes twinkled with their old glint.

Nick passed our table shortly afterwards. She detached herself from her partner and swooped down on us like a gaily coloured bird.

"Dancing on the edge of death," she said lightly.

"It is a new sensation, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes. Rather fun."

She was off again with a wave of her hand.

"I wish she hadn't said that," I said slowly. "Dancing on the edge of death. I don't like it."

"I know. It is too near the truth. She has courage, that little one. Yes, she has courage. But unfortunately it is not courage that is needed at this moment. Caution, not courage—*voilà ce qu'il nous faut!*"

The following day was Sunday. We were sitting on the terrace in front of the Hotel and it was about half past eleven when Poirot suddenly rose to his feet.

"Come, my friend. We will try a little experiment. I have ascertained that M. Lazarus and Madame have gone out in the car and Mademoiselle with them. The coast is clear."

"Clear for what?"

"You shall see."

We walked down the steps and across a short stretch of grass to where a gate gave onto the zigzag path leading down to the sea. A couple of bathers were coming up it. They passed us laughing and talking.

When they had gone, Poirot walked to the point where an inconspicuous small gate, rather rusty on its hinges, bore the words in half obliterated letters "End House. Private." There was no one in sight. We passed quietly through.

In another minute we came out on the stretch of lawn in front of the house. There was no one about. Poirot strolled to the edge of the cliff and looked over. Then he walked towards the house itself. The French windows onto the veranda were open and we passed straight into the drawing-room. Poirot wasted no time there. He opened the door and went out into the hall. From there he mounted the stairs, I at his heels. He went straight to Nick's bedroom—sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded to me with a twinkle.

"You see, my friend, how easy it is. No one has seen us come. No one will see us go. We could do any little affair we had to do in perfect safety. We could, for instance, fray through a picture wire so that it would be bound to snap before many hours had passed. And supposing that by chance anyone did happen to be in front of the house and see us coming. Then we would have a perfectly natural excuse—providing that we were known as friends of the house."

"You mean that we can rule out a stranger?"

"That is what I mean, Hastings. It is no stray lunatic who is at the bottom of this. We must look nearer home than that."

He turned to leave the room and I followed him. We neither of us spoke. We were both, I think, troubled in mind.

And then, at the bend of the staircase, we both stopped abruptly. A man was coming up.

He too, stopped. His face was in shadow but his attitude was of one completely taken aback. He was the first to speak, in a loud rather bullying voice.

"What the Hell are you doing here, I'd like to know?"

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Monsieur—Croft, I think?"

"That's my name, but what—"

"Shall we go into the drawing-room to converse? It would be better, I think."

The other gave way, turned abruptly and descended, we following close on his heels. In the drawing-room, with the door shut, Poirot made a little bow.

"I will introduce myself. Hercule Poirot, at your service."

The other's face cleared a little.

"Oh!" he said slowly. "You're the detective chap. I've read about you."

"In the St. Loo Herald?"

"Eh? I've read about you way back in Australia. French, aren't you?"

"Belgian. It makes no matter. This is my friend, Captain Hastings."

"Glad to meet you. But look, what's the big idea? What are you doing here? Anything—wrong?"

"It depends what you call—wrong."

The Australian nodded. He was a fine-looking man in spite of his bald head and advancing years. His physique was magnificent. He had a heavy, rather underhung face—a crude face, I called it to myself. The piercing blue of his eyes was the most noticeable thing about him.

"See here," he said. "I came round to bring little Miss Buckley a handful of tomatoes and a cucumber. That man of hers is no good—bone idle—doesn't grow a thing. Lazy hound. Mother and I—why, it makes us mad and we feel it's only neighbourly to do what we can! We've got a lot more tomatoes than we can eat. Neighbours should be matey, don't you think? I came in, as usual, through the window and dumped the basket down. I was just going off again when I heard footsteps and men's voices overhead. That struck me as odd. We don't deal much in burglars round here—but after all it was possible. I thought I'd just make sure everything was all right. Then I met you two on the stairs coming down. It gave me a bit of a surprise. And now you tell me you're a bonza detective. What's it all about?"

"It is very simple," said Poirot smiling. "Mademoiselle had a rather alarming experience the other night. A picture fell above her bed. She may have told you of it?"

"She did. A mighty fine escape."

"To make all secure I promised to bring her some special chain—it will not do to repeat the occurrence, eh? She tells me she is going out this morning but I may come and measure what amount of chain will be needed. *Voilà*—it is simple."

He flung out his hands with a childlike simplicity and his most engaging smile.

Croft drew a deep breath.

"So that's all it is?"

"Yes—you have had the scare for nothing. We are very law-abiding citizens, my friend and I."

"Didn't I see you yesterday?" said Croft slowly. "Yesterday evening it was. You passed our little place."

"Ah! yes, you were working in the garden and were so polite as to say good-afternoon when we passed."

"That's right. Well—well. And you're the Monsieur Hercule Poirot I've heard so much about. Tell me, are you busy, Mr Poirot? Because if not, I wish you'd come back with me now—have a cup of morning tea, Australian fashion, and meet my old lady. She's read all about you in the newspapers."

"You are too kind, M. Croft. We have nothing to do and shall be delighted."

"That's fine."

"You have the measurements correctly, Hastings?" asked Poirot turning to me.

I assured him that I had the measurements correctly and we accompanied our new friend.

Croft was a talker, we soon realized that. He told us of his home near Melbourne, of his early struggles, of his meeting with his wife, of their combined efforts and of his final good fortune and success.

"Right away we made up our minds to travel," he said. "We'd always wanted to come to the old country. Well, we did. We came down to this part of the world—tried to look up some of my wife's people—they came from round about here. But we couldn't trace any of them. Then we took a trip on the Continent—Paris, Rome, the Italian Lakes, Florence—all those places. It was while we were in Italy that we had the train accident. My poor wife was badly smashed up. Cruel, wasn't it? I've taken her to the best doctors and they all say the same—there's nothing for it but time—time and lying up. It's an injury to the spine."

"What a misfortune!"

"Hard luck, isn't it? Well, there it was. And she'd only got one kind of fancy—to come down here. She kind of felt if we had a little place of our own—something small—it would make all the difference. We saw a lot of messy looking shacks, and then by good luck we found this. Nice and quiet and tucked away—no cars passing, or gramophones next door. I took it right away."

With the last words we had come to the Lodge itself. He sent his voice echoing forth in a loud "Cooee" to which came an answering "Cooee."

"Come in," said Mr Croft. He passed through the open door and up the short flight of stairs to a pleasant bedroom. There, on a sofa, was a stout middle-aged woman with pretty grey hair and a very sweet smile.

"Who do you think this is, Mother?" said Mr Croft. "The extra special world-celebrated detective, Mr Hercule Poirot. I brought him right along to have a chat with you."

"If that isn't too exciting for words," cried Mrs Croft shaking Poirot warmly by the hand. "Read about that Blue Train business, I did, and you just happening to be on it, and a lot about your other cases. Since this trouble with my back, I've read all the detective stories that ever were, I should think. Nothing else seems to pass the time away so quick. Bert dear, call out to Edith to bring the tea along."

"Right you are, Mother."

"She's a kind of nurse attendant, Edith is," Mrs Croft explained. "She comes along each morning to fix me up. We're not bothering with servants. Bert's as good a cook and a house-parlour-man as you'd find anywhere, and it gives him occupation—that and the garden."

"Here we are," cried Mr Croft reappearing with a tray. "Here's the tea. This is a great day in our lives, Mother."

"I suppose you're staying down here, Mr Poirot?" Mrs Croft asked as she leaned over a little and wielded the tea pot.

"Why yes, Madame, I take the holiday."

"But surely I read that you had retired—that you'd taken a holiday for good and all."

"Ah! Madame, you must not believe everything you read in the papers."

"Well, that's true enough. So you still carry on business?"

"When I find a case that interests me."

"Sure you're not down here on work," inquired Mr Croft shrewdly. "Calling it a holiday might be all part of the game."

"You mustn't ask him embarrassing questions, Bert," said Mrs Croft. "Or he won't come again. We're simple people, Mr Poirot, and you're giving us a great treat coming here today—you and your friend. You really don't know the pleasure you're giving us."

She was so natural and so frank in her gratification that my heart quite warmed to her.

"That was a bad business about that picture," said Mr Croft.

"That poor little girl might have been killed," said Mrs Croft with deep feeling. "She is a live wire. Livens the place up when she comes down here. Not much liked in the neighbourhood, so I've heard. But that's the way in these stuck up English places. They don't like life and gaiety in a girl. I don't wonder she doesn't spend much time down here. And that long nosed cousin of hers has no more chance of persuading her to settle down here for good and all than—than—well, I don't know what."

"Don't gossip, Milly," said her husband.

"Aha," said Poirot. "The wind is in that quarter. Trust the instinct of Madame! So M. Charles Vyse is in love with our little friend?"

"He's silly about her," said Mrs Croft. "But she won't marry a country lawyer. And I don't blame her. He's a poor stick anyway. I'd like her to marry that nice sailor—what's his name, Challenger. Many a smart marriage might be worse than that. He's older than she is, but what of that? Steadying—that's what she needs. Flying about all over the place, the

Continent even, all alone or with that queer looking Mrs Rice. She's a sweet girl, Mr Poirot—I know that well enough. But I'm worried about her. She's looked none too happy lately. She's had what I call a haunted kind of look. And it worries me! I've got my reasons for being interested in that girl, haven't I, Bert?"

Mr Croft got up from his chair rather suddenly.

"No need to go into that, Milly," he said. "I wonder, Mr Poirot, if you'd care to see some snapshots of Australia?"

The rest of our visit passed uneventfully. Ten minutes later we took our leave.

"Nice people," I said. "So simple and unassuming. Typical Australians."

"You liked them?"

"Didn't you?"

"They were very pleasant—very friendly."

"Well, what is it then? There's something, I can see."

"They were, perhaps, just a shade too 'typical,' " said Poirot thoughtfully. "That cry of Cooee—that insistence on showing us snapshots—was it not perhaps playing a part just a little too thoroughly?"

"What a suspicious old devil you are!"

"You are right, *mon ami.* I am suspicious of everyone—of everything. I am afraid, Hastings—afraid."

CHAPTER VI

A CALL UPON MR. VYSE

POIROT CLUNG firmly to the Continental breakfast. To see me consuming eggs and bacon upset and distressed him—so he always said. Consequently he breakfasted in bed upon coffee and rolls and I was free to start the day with the traditional Englishman's breakfast of bacon and eggs and marmalade.

I looked into his room on Monday morning as I went downstairs. He was sitting up in bed arrayed in a very marvellous dressing-gown.

"Bon jour, Hastings. I was just about to ring. This note that I have written, will you be so good as to get it taken over to End House and delivered to Mademoiselle at once."

I held out my hand for it. Poirot looked at me and sighed.

"If only—if only, Hastings, you would part your hair in the middle instead of at the side! What a difference it would make to the symmetry of your appearance. And your moustache. If you *must* have a moustache, let it be a real moustache—a thing of beauty such as mine."

Repressing a shudder at the thought, I took the note firmly from Poirot's hand and left the room.

I had rejoined him in our sitting-room when word was sent up to say Miss Buckley had called. Poirot gave the order for her to be shown up.

She came in gaily enough, but I fancied that the circles under her eyes were darker than usual. In her hand she held a telegram which she handed to Poirot.

"There," she said. "I hope that will please you!"

Poirot read it aloud.

"Arrive 5.30 today Maggie."

"My nurse and guardian!" said Nick. "But you're wrong, you know. Maggie's got no kind of brains. Good works is about all she's fit for. That and never seeing the point of jokes. Freddie would be ten times better at spotting hidden assassins. And Jim Lazarus would be better still. I never feel one has got to the bottom of Jim."

"And the Commander Challenger?"

"Oh! George! He'd never see anything till it was under his nose. But he'd let them have it when he did see. Very useful when it came to a show down, George would be."

She tossed off her hat and went on.

"I gave orders for the man you wrote about to be let in. It sounds mysterious. Is he installing a dictaphone or something like that?"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, nothing scientific. A very simple little matter of opinion, Mademoiselle. Something I wanted to know."

"Oh, well," said Nick, "It's all great fun, isn't it?"

"Is it, Mademoiselle?" asked Poirot gently.

She stood for minute with her back to us, looking out of the window. Then she turned. All the brave defiance had gone out of her face. It was childishly twisted awry, as she struggled to keep back the tears.

"No," she said. "It—it isn't really. I'm afraid—I'm afraid. Hideously afraid. And I always thought I was brave."

"So you are, *mon enfant,* so you are. Both Hastings and I, we have both admired your courage."

"Yes, indeed," I put in warmly.

"No," said Nick, shaking her head. "I'm not brave. It's—it's the waiting. Wondering the whole time if anything more's going to happen. And how it'll happen! And expecting it to happen."

"Yes, yes—it is the strain."

"Last night I pulled my bed out into the middle of the room. And I fastened my window and bolted my door. When I came here this morning, I came round by the road. I couldn't—I simply couldn't come through the garden. It's as though my nerve had gone all of a sudden. It's this thing coming on top of everything else."

"What do you mean exactly by that, Mademoiselle? On top of everything else?"

There was a momentary pause before she replied.

"I don't mean anything particular. What the newspapers call 'the strain of modern life,' I suppose. Too many cocktails, too many cigarettes—all that sort of thing. It's just that I've got into a ridiculous—sort of—of state."

She had sunk into a chair and was sitting there, her small fingers curling and uncurling themselves nervously.

"You are not being frank with me, Mademoiselle. There is something."

"There isn't—there really isn't."

"There is something you have not told me."

"I've told you every single smallest thing."

She spoke sincerely and earnestly.

"About these accidents—about the attacks upon you, yes."

"Well—then?"

"But you have not told me everything that is in your heart—in your life. . . ."

She said slowly:

"Can anyone do that . . . ?"

"Ah! then," said Poirot with triumph. "You admit it!"

She shook her head. He watched her keenly.

"Perhaps," he suggested shrewdly. "It is not your secret?"

I thought I saw a momentary flicker of her eyelids. But almost immediately she jumped up.

"Really and truly, M. Poirot, I've told you every single thing I know about this stupid business. If you think I know something about someone else, or have suspicions, you are wrong. It's having no suspicions that's driving me mad! Because I'm not a fool. I can see that if these 'accidents' weren't accidents, they must have been engineered by somebody very near at hand—somebody who—knows me. And that's what is so awful. Because I haven't the least idea—not the very least—who that somebody might be."

She went over once more to the window and stood looking out. Poirot signed to me not to speak. I think he was hoping for some further revelation, now that the girl's self-control had broken down.

When she spoke, it was in a different tone of voice, a dreamy far away voice.

"Do you know a queer wish I've always had? I love End House. I've always wanted to produce a play there. It's got an—an atmosphere of drama about it. I've seen all sorts of plays staged there in my mind. And now it's as though a drama were being acted there. Only I'm not producing it . . . I'm in it! I'm right in it! I am, perhaps, the person who—dies in the first act."

Her voice broke.

"Now, now, Mademoiselle," Poirot's voice was resolutely brisk and cheerful. "This will not do. This is the hysteria."

She turned and looked at him sharply.

"Did Freddie tell you I was hysterical?" she asked. "She says I am, sometimes. But you mustn't always believe what Freddie says. There are times, you know, when—when she isn't quite herself."

There was a pause, then Poirot asked a totally irrelevant question.

"Tell me, Mademoiselle," he said. "Have you ever received an offer for End House?"

"To sell it, do you mean?"

"That is what I meant."

"No."

"Would you consider selling it if you got a good offer?"

Nick considered for a moment.

"No, I don't think so. Not, I mean, unless it was such a ridiculously good offer that it would be perfectly foolish not to."

"Précisément."

"I don't want to sell it, you know, because I'm fond of it."

"Quite so. I understand."

Nick moved slowly towards the door.

"By the way, there are fireworks tonight. Will you come? Dinner at eight o'clock. The fireworks begin at nine thirty. You can see them splendidly from the garden where it overlooks the harbour."

"I shall be enchanted."

"Both of you, of course," said Nick.

"Many thanks," I said.

"Nothing like a party for reviving the drooping spirits," remarked Nick. And with a little laugh she went out.

"Pauvre enfant," said Poirot.

He reached for his hat and carefully flicked an infinitesimal speck of dust from its surface.

"We are going out?" I asked.

"Mais oui, we have legal business to transact, *mon ami."*

"Of course. I understand."

"One of your brilliant mentality could not fail to do so, Hastings."

The offices of Messrs Vyse, Trevannion & Wynnard were situated in the main street of the town. We mounted the stairs to the first floor and entered a room where three clerks were busily writing. Poirot asked to see Mr Charles Vyse.

A clerk murmured a few words down a telephone, received, apparently, an affirmative reply and remarking that Mr Vyse would see us now, he led us across the passage, tapped on a door and stood aside for us to pass in.

From behind a large desk covered with legal papers, Mr Vyse rose up to greet us.

He was a tall young man, rather pale, with impassive features. He was going a little bald on either temple and wore glasses. His colouring was fair and indeterminate.

Poirot had come prepared for the encounter. Fortunately he had with him an agreement, as yet unsigned, and on some technical points in connection with this, he wanted Mr Vyse's advise.

Mr Vyse, speaking carefully and correctly, was soon able to allay Poirot's alleged doubts, and to clear up some obscure points of the wording.

"I am very much obliged to you," murmured Poirot. "As a foreigner, you comprehend, these legal matters and phrasing are most difficult."

It was then that Mr Vyse asked who had sent Poirot to him.

"Miss Buckley," said Poirot promptly. "Your cousin, is she not? A most charming young lady. I happened to mention that I was in perplexity and she told me to come to you. I tried to see you on Saturday morning—about half past twelve—but you were out."

"Yes, I remember. I left early on Saturday."

"Mademoiselle your cousin must find that large house very lonely? She lives there alone, I understand."

"Quite so."

"Tell me, M. Vyse, if I may ask, is there any chance of that property being in the market?"

"Not the least, I should say."

"You understand, I do not ask idly. I have a reason! I am in search myself, of just such a property. The climate of St. Loo enchants me. It is true that the house appears to be in bad repair, there has not been, I gather, much money to spend upon it. Under those circumstances, is it not possible that Mademoiselle would consider an offer?"

"Not the least likelihood of it," Charles Vyse shook his head with the utmost decision. "My cousin is absolutely devoted to the place. Nothing would induce her to sell, I know. It is, you understand, a family place."

"I comprehend that, but—"

"It is absolutely out of the question. I know my cousin. She has a fanatical devotion to the house."

A few minutes later we were out in the street again.

"Well, my friend," said Poirot. "And what impression did this M. Charles Vyse make upon you?"

I considered.

"A very negative one," I said at last. "He is a curiously negative person."

"Not a strong personality, you would say?"

"No, indeed. The kind of man you would never remember on meeting him again. A mediocre person."

"His appearance is certainly not striking. Did you notice any discrepancy in the course of our conversation with him?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "I did. With regard to the selling of End House."

"Exactly. Would you have described Mademoiselle Buckley's attitude towards End House as one of 'fanatical devotion'?"

"It is a very strong term."

"Yes—and M. Vyse is not given to using strong terms. His normal attitude—a legal attitude—is to under rather than over state. Yet he says that Mademoiselle has a fanatical devotion to the home of her ancestors."

"She did not convey that impression this morning," I said. "She spoke about it very sensibly, I thought. She's obviously fond of the place—just as anyone in her position would be—but certainly nothing more."

"So, in fact, one of the two is lying," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"One would not suspect Vyse of lying."

"Clearly a great asset if one has any lying to do," remarked Poirot. "Yes, he has quite the air of a George Washington, that one. Did you notice another thing, Hastings?"

"What was that?"

"He was not in his office at half past twelve on Saturday."

CHAPTER VII

TRAGEDY

THE FIRST person we saw when we arrived at End House that evening was Nick. She was dancing about the hall wrapped in a marvellous kimono covered with dragons.

"Oh! it's only you!"

"Mademoiselle—I am desolated!"

"I know. It did sound rude. But you see, I'm waiting for my dress to arrive. They promised—the brutes—promised faithfully!"

"Ah! if it is a matter of *la toilette!* There is a dance tonight, is there not?"

"Yes. We are all going on to it after the fireworks. That is, I suppose we are."

There was a sudden drop in her voice. But the next minute she was laughing.

"Never give in! That's my motto. Don't think of trouble and trouble won't come! I've got my nerve back tonight. I'm going to be gay and enjoy myself."

There was a footfall on the stairs. Nick turned.

"Oh! here's Maggie. Maggie, here are the sleuths that are protecting me from the secret assassin. Take them into the drawing-room and let them tell you about it."

In turn we shook hands with Maggie Buckley and as requested she took us into the drawing-room. I formed an immediate favourable opinion of her.

It was, I think, her appearance of calm good sense that so attracted me. A quiet girl, pretty in the old-fashioned sense—certainly not smart. Her face was innocent of makeup and she wore a simple rather shabby black evening dress. She had frank blue eyes, and a pleasant slow voice.

"Nick has been telling me the most amazing things," she said. "Surely she must be exaggerating? Who ever would want to harm Nick? She can't have an enemy in the world."

Incredulity showed strongly in her voice. She was looking at Poirot in a somewhat unflattering fashion. I realized that to a girl like Maggie Buckley, foreigners were always suspicious.

"Nevertheless, Miss Buckley, I assure you that it is the truth," said Poirot quietly.

She made no reply but her face remained unbelieving.

"Nick seems quite fey tonight," she remarked. "I don't know what's the matter with her. She seems in the wildest spirits."

That word—fey! It sent a shiver through me. Also, something in the intonation of her voice had set me wondering.

"Are you Scotch, Miss Buckley?" I asked abruptly.

"My Mother was Scottish," she explained.

She viewed me, I noticed with more approval than she viewed Poirot. I felt that my statement of the case would carry more weight with her than Poirot's would.

"Your cousin is behaving with great bravery," I said. "She's determined to carry on as usual."

"It's the only way, isn't it?" said Maggie. "I mean—whatever one's inward feelings are—it is no good making a fuss about them. That's only uncomfortable for everyone else." She paused and then added in a soft voice. "I'm very fond of Nick. She's been very good to me always."

We could say nothing more for at that moment Frederica Rice drifted into the room. She was wearing a gown of Madonna blue and looked very fragile and ethereal. Lazarus soon followed her and then Nick danced in. She was wearing a black frock and round her was wrapped a marvellous old Chinese shawl of vivid lacquer red.

"Hullo, people," she said. "Cocktails."

We all drank and Lazarus raised his glass to her.

"That's a marvellous shawl, Nick," he said. "It's an old one, isn't it?"

"Yes—brought back by Great-Great-Great-Uncle Timothy from his travels."

"It's a beauty—a real beauty. You wouldn't find another to match it if you tried."

"It's warm," said Nick. "It'll be nice when we're watching the fireworks. And it's gay. I—I hate black."

"Yes," said Frederica. "I don't believe I've ever seen you in a black dress before, Nick. Why did you get it?"

"Oh! I don't know." The girl flung aside with a petulant gesture, but I had caught a curious curl of her lips as though of pain. "Why does one do anything?"

We went into dinner. A mysterious manservant had appeared—hired, I presume for the occasion. The food was indifferent. The champagne, on the other hand, was good.

"George hasn't turned up," said Nick. "A nuisance his having to go back to Plymouth last night. He'll get over this evening some time or other, I expect. In time for the dance, anyway. I've got a man for Maggie. Presentable, if not passionately interesting."

A faint roaring sound drifted in through the window.

"Oh! curse that speed boat," said Lazarus. "I get so tired of it."

"That's not the speed boat," said Nick. "That's a seaplane."

"I believe you're right."

"Of course I'm right. The sound's quite different."

"When are you going to get your Moth, Nick?"

"When I can raise the money," laughed Nick.

"And then, I suppose, you'll be off to Australia like that girl—what's her name?"

"I'd love to—"

"I admire her enormously," said Mrs Rice in her tired voice. "What marvellous nerve! All by herself too."

"I admire all these flying people," said Lazarus. "If Michael Seton had succeeded in his flight round the world he'd have been the hero of the day —and rightly so. A thousand pities he's come to grief. He's the kind of man England can't afford to lose."

"He may still be all right," said Nick.

"Hardly. It's a thousand to one against by now. Poor Mad Seton."

"They always called him Mad Seton, didn't they?" asked Frederica.

Lazarus nodded.

"He comes of rather a mad family," he said. "His uncle, Sir Matthew Seton who died about a week ago—he was as mad as a hatter."

"He was the mad millionaire who ran bird sanctuaries, wasn't he?" asked Frederica.

"Yes. Used to buy up islands. He was a great woman hater. Some girl chucked him once, I believe, and he took to Natural History by way of consoling himself."

"Why do you say Michael Seton is dead?" persisted Nick. "I don't see any reason for giving up hope—yet?"

"Of course, you knew him, didn't you?" said Lazarus. "I forgot."

"Freddie and I met him at Le Touquet last year," said Nick. "He was too marvellous, wasn't he, Freddie?"

"Don't ask me, darling. He was your conquest, not mine. He took you up once, didn't he?"

"Yes—at Scarborough. It was simply too wonderful."

"Have you done any flying, Captain Hastings?" Maggie asked of me in polite conversational tones.

I had to confess that a trip to Paris and back was the extent of my acquaintance with air travel.

Suddenly, with an exclamation—Nick sprang up.

"There's the telephone. Don't wait for me. It's getting late. And I've asked lots of people."

She left the room. I glanced at my watch. It was just nine o'clock. Dessert was brought, and port. Poirot and Lazarus were talking Art. Pictures, Lazarus was saying, were a great drug in the market just now. They went on to discuss new ideas in furniture and decoration.

I endeavoured to do my duty by talking to Maggie Buckley, but I had to admit that the girl was heavy in hand. She answered pleasantly but without throwing the ball back. It was uphill work.

Frederica Rice sat dreamily silent, her elbows on the table and the smoke from her cigarette curling round her fair head. She looked like a meditative angel.

It was just twenty past nine when Nick put her head round the door.

"Come out of it, all of you! The animals are coming in two by two."

We rose obediently. Nick was busy greeting arrivals. About a dozen people had been asked. Most of them were rather uninteresting. Nick, I noticed, made a good hostess. She sunk her modernisms and made everyone welcome in an old-fashioned way. Amongst the guests I noticed Charles Vyse.

Presently we all moved out into the garden to a place overlooking the sea and the harbour. A few chairs had been placed there for the elderly people, but most of us stood. The first rocket flamed to Heaven.

At that moment, I heard a loud familiar voice and turned my head to see Nick greeting Mr Croft.

"It's too bad," she was saying, "that Mrs Croft can't be here too. We ought to have carried her on a stretcher or something."

"It's bad luck on poor Mother altogether. But she never complains—that woman's got the sweetest nature —Ha! that's a good one." This as a shower of golden rain showed up in the sky.

The night was a dark one—there was no moon—the new moon being due in three days time. It was also, like most summer evenings, cold. Maggie Buckley who was next me shivered.

"I'll just run in and get a coat," she murmured.

"Let me."

"No, you wouldn't know where to find it."

She turned towards the house. At that moment Frederica Rice's voice called

"Oh! Maggie, get mine too. It's in my room."

"She didn't hear," said Nick. "I'll get it Freddie. I want my fur one—this shawl isn't nearly hot enough. It's this wind."

There was, indeed, a sharp breeze blowing off the sea.

Some set pieces started down on the quay. I fell into conversation with an elderly young lady standing next me who put me through a rigorous catechism as to life, career, tastes and probable length of stay.

Bang! A shower of green stars filled the sky. They changed to blue, then red, then silver.

Another and yet another.

" 'Oh!' and then 'Ah!' that is what one says," observed Poirot suddenly close to my ear. "At the end it becomes monotonous, do you not find? Brrrr! The grass, it is damp to the feet! I shall suffer for this—a chill. And no possibility of obtaining a proper *tisane!*"

"A chill? On a lovely night like this?"

"A lovely night! A lovely night! You say that, because the rain it does not pour down in sheets! Always when the rain does not fall, it is a lovely night. But I tell you, my friend, if there were a little thermometer to consult you would see."

"Well," I admitted. "I wouldn't mind putting on a coat myself."

"You are very sensible. You have come from a hot climate."

"I'll bring yours."

Poirot lifted first one, then the other foot from the ground with a cat-like motion.

"It is the dampness of the feet I fear. Would it, think you, be possible to lay the hands on a pair of galoshes?"

I repressed a smile.

"Not a hope," I said. "You understand, Poirot, that it is no longer done."

"Then I shall sit in the house," he declared. "Just for the Guy Fawkes show, shall I wantonly *enrhumer* myself? And catch, perhaps, a *fluxion de poitrine?*"

Poirot still murmuring indignantly, we bent our footsteps towards the house. Loud clapping drifted up to us from the quay below where another set piece was being shown—a ship, I believe, with *Welcome to Our Visitors* displayed across it.

"We are all children at heart," said Poirot thoughtfully. *"Les Feus d'Artifices,* the Party, the games with balls—yes, and even the conjuror, the man who deceives the eye, however carefully it watches—*mais qu'est ce que vous avez?"*

I had caught him by the arm, and was clutching him with one hand while with the other I pointed.

We were within a hundred yards of the house and just in front of us, between us and the open French window, *there lay a huddled figure wrapped in a scarlet Chinese shawl. . . .*

"Mon Dieu!" whispered Poirot. *"Mon Dieu. . . ."*

CHAPTER VIII

THE FATAL SHAWL

I SUPPOSE it was not more than forty seconds that we stood there, frozen with horror, unable to move, but it seemed like an hour. Then Poirot moved forward shaking off my hand. He moved stiffly like an automaton.

"It has happened," he murmured, and I can hardly describe the anguished bitterness of his voice. "In spite of everything—in spite of my precautions it has happened. Ah! miserable criminal that I am, why did I not guard her better. I should have foreseen yes—I should have foreseen. Not for one instant should I have left her side."

"You mustn't blame yourself," I said.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth and I could hardly articulate.

Poirot only responded with a sorrowful shake of his head. He knelt down by the body.

And at that moment we received a second shock.

For Nick's voice rang out, clear and gay, and a moment later Nick appeared in the square of the window silhouetted against the lighted room behind.

"Sorry I've been so long, Maggie," she said. "But—

Then she broke off—staring at the scene before her.

With a sharp exclamation Poirot turned over the body on the lawn and I pressed forward to see.

I looked down into the dead face of Maggie Buckley.

In another minute Nick was beside us. She gave a sharp cry.

"Maggie— Oh! Maggie—it—it can't—"

Poirot was still examining the girl's body. At last very slowly he rose to his feet.

"Is she—is—" Nick's voice broke off.

"Yes, Mademoiselle. She is dead."

"But why? But why? Who could have wanted to kill her?"

Poirot's reply came quickly and firmly.

"It was not her they meant to kill, Mademoiselle! It was you! They were misled by the shawl."

A great cry broke from Nick.

"Why couldn't it have been me?" she wailed. "Oh! why couldn't it have been me? I'd so much rather. I don't want to live—now. I'd be glad—willing—happy—to die."

She flung up her arms wildly and then staggered slightly. I passed an arm round her quickly to support her.

"Take her into the house, Hastings," said Poirot. "Then ring up the police."

"The police?"

"Mais oui! Tell them someone has been shot. And afterwards stay with Mademoiselle Nick. On no account leave her."

I nodded comprehension of these instructions, and supporting the half fainting girl, made my way through the drawing-room window. I laid the girl on the sofa there, with a cushion under her head, and then hurried out into the hall in search of the telephone.

I gave a slight start on almost running into Ellen. She was standing there with a most peculiar expression on her meek respectable face. Her eyes were glittering and she was passing her tongue repeatedly over her dry lips. Her hands were trembling, as though with excitement. As soon as she saw me, she spoke.

"Has—has anything happened, sir?"

"Yes," I said curtly. "Where's the telephone?"

"Nothing—nothing wrong, sir?"

"There's been an accident," I said evasively. "Somebody hurt. I must telephone."

"Who has been hurt, sir?"

There was a positive eagerness in her face.

"Miss Buckley. Miss Maggie Buckley."

"Miss Maggie? Miss Maggie? Are you sure, sir—I mean are you sure that—that it's Miss Maggie?"

"I'm quite sure," I said. "Why?"

"Oh!—nothing. I—I thought it might be one of the other ladies. I thought perhaps it might be—Mrs Rice."

"Look here," I said. "Where's the telephone?"

"It's in the little room here, sir." She opened the door for me and indicated the instrument.

"Thanks," I said. And as she seemed disposed to linger, I added. "That's all I want, thank you."

"If you want Dr Graham—"

"No, no," I said. "That's all. Go, please."

She withdrew reluctantly, as slowly as she dared. In all probability she would listen outside the door, but I could not help that. After all, she would soon know all there was to be known.

I got the police station and made my report. Then, on my own initiative, I rang up the Dr Graham, Ellen had mentioned. I found his number in the book. Nick, at any rate, should have medical attention, I felt—even though a doctor could do nothing for that poor girl lying out there. He promised to come at once and I hung up the receiver and came out into the hall again.

If Ellen had been listening outside the door she had managed to disappear very swiftly. There was no one in sight when I came out. I went back into the drawing-room. Nick was trying to sit up.

"Do you think—could you get me—some brandy?"

"Of course."

I hurried into the dining-room, found what I wanted and came back. A few sips of the spirit revived the girl. The colour began to come back into her cheeks. I rearranged the cushion for her head.

"It's all—so awful." She shivered. "Everything—everywhere."

"I know, my dear, I know."

"No, you don't! You can't! And it's all such a waste. If it only were me. It would be all over. . . ."

"You mustn't," I said, "be morbid."

She only shook her head, reiterating: "You don't know! You don't know!"

Then, suddenly, she began to cry. A quiet hopeless sobbing like a child. That, I thought, was probably the best thing for her, so I made no effort to stem her tears.

When their first violence had died down a little, I stole across to the window and looked out. I had heard an outcry of voices a few minutes before. They were all there by now, a semi-circle round the scene of the tragedy, with Poirot like a fantastical sentinel, keeping them back.

As I watched, two uniformed figures came striding across the grass. The police had arrived.

I went quietly back to my place by the sofa. Nick lifted her tear-stained face.

"Oughtn't I to be doing something?"

"No, my dear. Poirot will see to it. Leave it to him."

Nick was silent for a minute or two, then she said:

"Poor Maggie. Poor dear old Maggie. Such a good sort who never harmed a soul in her life. That this should happen to her. I feel as though I'd killed her—bringing her down in the way that I did."

I shook my head sadly. How little one can foresee the future. When Poirot insisted on Nick's inviting a friend, how little did he think that he was signing an unknown girl's death warrant.

We sat in silence. I longed to know what was going on outside but I loyally fulfilled Poirot's instructions and stuck to my post.

It seemed hours later when the door opened and Poirot and a police inspector entered the room. With them came a man who was evidently Dr Graham. He came over at once at Nick.

"And how are you feeling, Miss Buckley? This must have been a terrible shock." His fingers were on her pulse. "Not too bad."

He turned to me.

"Has she had anything?"

"Some brandy," I said.

"I'm all right," said Nick bravely.

"Able to answer a few questions, eh?"

"Of course."

The police inspector moved forward with a preliminary cough. Nick greeted him with the ghost of a smile.

"Not impeding the traffic this time," she said.

I gathered they were not strangers to each other.

"This is a terrible business, Miss Buckley," said the inspector. "I'm very sorry about it. Now Mr Poirot here whose name I'm very familiar with (and proud we are to have him with us, I'm sure) tells me that to the best of his belief you were shot at in the grounds of the Majestic Hotel the other morning?"

Nick nodded.

"I thought it was just a wasp," she explained. "But it wasn't."

"And you'd had some rather peculiar accidents before that?"

"Yes—at least it was odd their happening so close together."

She gave a brief account of the various circumstances.

"Just so. Now how came it that your cousin was wearing your shawl tonight?"

"We came in to fetch her coat—it was rather cold watching the fireworks. I flung off the shawl on the sofa here. Then I went upstairs and put on the coat I'm wearing now—a light nutria one. I also got a wrap for my friend Mrs Rice out of her room. There it is on the floor by the window. Then Maggie called out that she couldn't find her coat. I said it must be downstairs. She went down and called up she still couldn't find it. I said it must have been left in the car—it was a tweed coat she was looking for—she hasn't got an evening furry one—and I said I'd bring her down something of mine. But she said it didn't matter—she'd take my shawl if I didn't want it. And I said of course but would that be enough? And she said, Oh! yes, because she really didn't feel it particularly cold after Yorkshire. She just wanted something. And I said all right, I'd be out in a minute. And when I did—did come out—"

She stopped, her voice breaking. . . .

"Now, don't distress yourself, Miss Buckley. Just tell me this. Did you hear a shot—or two shots?"

Nick shook her head.

"No—only just the fireworks popping and the squibs going off."

"That's just it," said the inspector. "You'd never notice a shot with all that going on. It's no good asking you, I suppose, if you've any clue to who it is making these attacks upon you?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Nick. "I can't imagine."

"And you wouldn't be likely to," said the inspector. "Some homicidal maniac—that's what it looks like to me. Nasty business. Well, I won't need to ask you any more questions tonight, Miss. I'm more sorry about this than I can say."

Dr Graham stepped forward.

"I'm going to suggest, Miss Buckley, that you don't stay here. I've been talking it over with M. Poirot. I know of an excellent nursing home. You've had a shock, you know. What you need is complete rest—"

Nick was not looking at him. Her eyes had gone to Poirot.

"Is it—because of the shock?" she asked.

He came forward.

"I want you to feel safe, *mon enfant.* And *I* want to feel, too, that you are safe. There will be a nurse there—a nice practical unimaginative nurse. She will be near you all night. When you wake up and cry out—she will be there, close at hand. You understand?"

"Yes," said Nick. "I understand. But you don't. I'm not afraid any longer. I don't care one way or another. If anyone wants to murder me, they can."

"Hush, hush," I said. "You're over strung."

"You don't know. None of you know!"

"I really think M. Poirot's plan is a very good one," the doctor broke in soothingly. "I will take you in my car. And we will give you a little something to ensure a good night's rest. Now what do you say?"

"I don't mind," said Nick. "Anything you like. It doesn't matter."

Poirot laid his hand on hers.

"I know, Mademoiselle. I know what you must feel. I stand before you ashamed and stricken to the heart. I, who promised protection, have not been able to protect. I have failed. I am a miserable. But believe me, Mademoiselle, my heart is in agony because of that failure. If you knew what I am suffering, you would forgive, I am sure."

"That's all right," said Nick, still in the same dull voice. "You mustn't blame yourself. I'm sure you did the best you could. Nobody could have helped it—or done more, I'm sure. Please don't be unhappy."

"You are very generous, Mademoiselle."

"No, I—"

There was an interruption. The door flew open and George Challenger rushed into the room.

"What's all this?" he cried. "I've just arrived. To find a policeman at the gate and a rumour that somebody's dead. What is it all about? For God's sake, tell me. Is it—is it —Nick?"

The anguish in his tone was dreadful to hear. I suddenly realized that Poirot and the doctor between them completely blotted out Nick from his sight.

Before anyone had time to answer, he repeated his question.

"Tell me—it can't be true—Nick isn't dead?"

"No, *mon ami,*" said Poirot gently. "She is alive."

And he drew back so that Challenger could see the little figure on the sofa.

For a moment or two Challenger stared at her incredulously. Then, staggering a little, like a drunken man, he muttered:

"Nick—Nick."

And suddenly dropping on his knees beside the sofa and hiding his head in his hands, he cried in a muffled voice.

"Nick—my darling—I thought that you were dead."

Nick tried to sit up.

"It's all right, George. Don't be an idiot. I'm quite safe."

He raised his head and looked round wildly.

"But somebody's dead? The policeman said so."

"Yes," said Nick. "Maggie. Poor old Maggie. Oh!—"

A spasm twisted her face. The doctor and Poirot came forward. Graham helped her to her feet. He and Poirot, one on each side, helped her from the room.

"The sooner you get to your bed the better," remarked the doctor. "I'll take you along at once in my car. I've asked Mrs Rice to pack a few things ready for you to take."

They disappeared through the door. Challenger caught my arm.

"I don't understand. Where are they taking her?" I explained.

"Oh! I see. Now then, Hastings, for God's sake give me the hang of this thing. What a ghastly tragedy! That poor girl."

"Come and have a drink," I said. "You're all to pieces."

"I don't mind if I do."

We adjourned to the dining-room.

"You see," he explained as he put away a stiff whisky and soda, "I thought it was Nick."

There was very little doubt as to the feelings of Commander George Challenger. A more transparent lover never lived.

CHAPTER IX

A. TO J.

I DOUBT if I shall ever forget the night that followed. Poirot was a prey to such an agony of self-reproach that I was really alarmed. Ceaselessly he strode up and down the room heaping anathemas on his own head and deaf to my well-meant remonstrances.

"What it is to have too good an opinion of oneself. I am punished—yes, I am punished, I, Hercule Poirot. I was too sure of myself."

"No, no," I interpolated.

"But who would imagine—who could imagine—such unparalleled audacity? I had taken, as I thought, all possible precautions. I had warned the murderer—"

"Warned the murderer?"

"*Mais oui.* I had drawn attention to myself. I had let him see that I suspected—someone. I had made it, or so I thought, too dangerous for him to dare to repeat his attempts at murder. I had drawn a cordon round Mademoiselle. And he slips through it! Boldly—under our very eyes almost, he slips through it! In spite of us all—of everyone being on the alert, he achieves his object."

"Only he doesn't," I reminded him.

"That is the chance only! From my point of view, it is the same. A human life has been taken, Hastings—whose life is non-essential?"

"Of course," I said "I didn't mean that."

"But on the other hand, what you say is true. And that makes it worse—ten times worse. For the murderer is still as far as ever from achieving his object. Do you understand, my friend? The position is changed—for the worse. It may mean that not one life—but two—will be sacrificed."

"Not while you're about," I said stoutly.

He stopped and wrung my hand.

"*Merci, mon ami! Merci!* You still have confidence in the old one—you still have the faith. You put new courage into me. Hercule Poirot will not fail again. No second life shall be taken. I will rectify my error—for, see you, there must have been an error! Somewhere there has been a lack of order and method in my usually so well-arranged ideas. I will start again. Yes, I will start at the beginning. And this time—I will not fail."

"You really think, then," I said, "that Nick Buckley's life is still in danger?"

"My friend, for what other reason did I send her to this Nursing Home?"

"Then it wasn't the shock—"

"The shock! Pah! One can recover from shock as well in one's own home as in a Nursing Home—better for that matter. It is not amusing there, the floors of green linoleum, the conversation of the nurses—the meals on trays, the ceaseless washing. No, no, it is for safety and safety only. I take the doctor into my confidence. He agrees. He will make all arrangements. No one, *mon ami,* not even her dearest friend, will be admitted to see Miss Buckley. You and I are the only ones permitted. *Pour les autres—eh bien!* 'doctor's orders,' they will be told. A phrase very convenient and one not to be gainsayed."

"Yes," I said. "Only—"

"Only what, Hastings?"

"That can't go on for ever."

"A very true observation. But it gives us a little breathing space. And you realize, do you not, that the character of our operations has changed."

"In what way?"

"Our original task was to ensure the safety of Mademoiselle. Our task now is a much simpler one—a task with which we are well acquainted. It is neither more nor less than the hunting down of a murderer."

"You call that simpler?"

"Certainly it is simpler. The murderer has, as I said the other day, signed his name to the crime. He has come out into the open."

"You don't think—" I hesitated, then went on. "You don't think that the police are right? That this is the work of a madman, some wandering lunatic with homicidal mania?"

"I am more than ever convinced that such is not the case."

"You really think that—"

I stopped. Poirot took up my sentence, speaking very gravely.

"That the murderer is someone in Mademoiselle's own circle? Yes, *mon ami,* I do."

"But surely last night must almost rule out that possibility. We were all together and—"

He interrupted.

"Could you swear, Hastings, that any particular person had never left our little company there on the edge of the cliff? Is there any one person there whom you could swear you had seen all the time?"

"No," I said slowly, struck by his words. "I don't think I could. It was dark. We all moved about, more or less. On different occasions I noticed Mrs Rice, Lazarus, you, Croft, Vyse—but all the time—no."

Poirot nodded his head.

"Exactly. It would be a matter of a very few minutes. The two girls go to the house. The murderer slips away unnoticed, hides behind that sycamore tree in the middle of the lawn. Nick Buckley, or so he thinks, comes out of the window, passes within a foot of him, he fires three shots in rapid succession—"

"Three?" I interjected.

"Yes. He was taking no chances this time. We found three bullets in the body."

"That was risky, wasn't it?"

"Less risky in all probability than one shot would have been. A Mauser pistol does not make a great deal of noise. It would resemble more or less the popping of the fireworks and blend in very well with the noise of them."

"Did you find the pistol?" I asked.

"No. And there, Hastings, lies to my mind the indisputable proof that no stranger is responsible for this. We agree, do we not, that Miss Buckley's own pistol was taken in the first place for one reason only—to give her death the appearance of suicide."

"Yes."

"That is the only possible reason, is it not? But now, you observe, there is no pretence of suicide. The murderer knows that we should not any longer be deceived by it. He knows, in fact, what we know!"

I reflected, admitting to myself the logic of Poirot's deduction.

"What did he do with the pistol, do you think?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"For that, it is difficult to say. But the sea was exceedingly handy. A good toss of the arm, and the pistol sinks, never to be recovered. We cannot, of course, be absolutely sure—but that is what *I* should have done."

His matter-of-fact tone made me shiver a little.

"Do you think—do you think he realized that he'd killed the wrong person?"

"I am quite sure he did not," said Poirot grimly. "Yes, that must have been an unpleasant little surprise for him when he learnt the truth. To keep his face and betray nothing—it cannot have been easy."

At that moment I bethought me of the strange attitude of the maid, Ellen. I gave Poirot an account of her peculiar demeanour. He seemed much interested.

"She betrayed surprise, did she, that it was Maggie who was dead?"

"Great surprise."

"That is curious. And yet, the fact of a tragedy was clearly not a surprise to her. Yes, there is something there that must be looked into. Who is she, this Ellen? So quiet, so respectable in the English manner? Could it be she who—?" he broke off.

"If you're going to include the accidents," I said, "surely it would take a man to have rolled that heavy boulder down the cliff."

"Not necessarily. It is very largely a question of leverage. Oh! yes, it could be done."

He continued his slow pacing up and down the room.

"Anyone who was at End House last night comes under suspicion. But those guests—no, I do not think it was one of them. For the most part, I should say, they were mere acquaintances. There was no intimacy between them and the young mistress of the house."

"Charles Vyse was there," I remarked.

"Yes, we must not forget him. He is, logically, our strongest suspect." He made a gesture of despair and threw himself into a chair opposite mine. *"Voilà*—it is always that we come back to! Motive! We must find the motive if we are to understand this crime. And it is there, Hastings, that I am continually baffled. Who can possibly have a motive for doing away with Mademoiselle Nick? I have let myself go to the most absurd suppositions. I, Hercule Poirot, have descended to the most ignominious flights of fancy. I have adopted the mentality of the cheap thriller. The grandfather—the 'Old Nick'—he who is supposed to have gambled his money away. Did he really do so, I have asked myself? Did he, on the contrary, hide it away? Is it hidden somewhere in End House? Buried somewhere in the grounds? With that end in view (I am ashamed to say it) I inquired of Mademoiselle Nick whether there had ever been any offers to buy the house."

"Do you know, Poirot," I said. "I call that rather a bright idea. There may be something in it."

Poirot groaned.

"You would say that! It would appeal, I knew, to your romantic but slightly mediocre mind. Buried treasure—yes, you would enjoy that idea."

"Well—I don't see why not—"

"Because, my friend, the more prosaic explanation is nearly always the more probable. Then Mademoiselle's father— I have played with even more degrading ideas concerning him. He was a traveller. Supposing, I say to myself, that he has stolen a jewel—the eye of a God. Jealous priests are on his track. Yes, I, Hercule Poirot, have descended to depths such as these.

"I have had other ideas concerning this father," he went on. "Ideas at once more dignified and more probable. Did he, in the course of his wanderings, contract a second marriage? Is there a nearer heir than M. Charles Vyse? But again, that leads nowhere, for we are up against the same difficulty—that there is really nothing of value to inherit.

"I have neglected no possibility. Even that chance reference of Mademoiselle Nick's to the offer made her by M. Lazarus. You remember? The offer to purchase her grandfather's portrait. I telegraphed on Saturday for an expert to come down and examine that picture. He was the man about whom I wrote to Mademoiselle this morning. Supposing, for instance, it were worth several thousand pounds?"

"You surely don't think a rich man like young Lazarus—?"

"Is he rich? Appearances are not everything. Even an old established firm with palatial showrooms and every appearance of prosperity may rest on a rotten basis. And what does one do then? Does one run about crying out that times are hard? No, one buys a new and luxurious car. One spends a little more money than usual. One lives a little more ostentatiously. For credit, see you, is everything! But sometimes a monumental business has crashed—for no more than a few thousand pounds—of ready money.

"Oh! I know," he continued forestalling my protests. "It is far fetched—but it is not so bad as revengeful priests or buried treasure. It bears, at any rate, some relationship to things as they happen. And we can neglect nothing—nothing that might bring us nearer the truth."

With careful fingers he straightened the objects on the table in front of him. When he spoke, his voice was grave and, for the first time, calm.

"Motive!" he said. "Let us come back to that, and regard this problem calmly and methodically. To begin with, how many kinds of motive are there for murder? What are the motives which lead one human being to take another human being's life?

"We exclude for the moment homicidal mania. Because I am absolutely convinced that the solution of our problem does not lie there. We also exclude killing done on the spur of the moment under the impulse of an ungovernable temper. This is cold-blooded deliberate murder. What are the motives that actuate such a murder as that?

"There is, first, Gain. Who stood to gain by Mademoiselle Buckley's death? Directly or indirectly. Well, we can put down Charles Vyse. He inherits a property that, from the financial point of view, is probably not worth inheriting. He might, perhaps, pay off the mortgage, build small villas on the land and eventually make a small profit. It is possible. The place might be worth something to him if he had any deeply cherished love of it—if, it were, for instance, a family place. That is, undoubtedly, an instinct very deeply implanted in some human beings, and it has, in cases I have known, actually led to crime. But I cannot see any such motive in M. Vyse's case.

"The only other person who would benefit at all by Mademoiselle Buckley's death is her friend, Madame Rice. But the amount would clearly be a very small one. Nobody else, as far as I can see, gains by Mademoiselle Buckley's death.

"What is another motive? Hate—or love that has turned to hate. The *crime passionnel.* Well, there again we have the word of the observant Madame Croft that both Charles Vyse and Commander Challenger are in love with the young lady."

"I think we can say that we have observed the latter phenomenon for ourselves," I remarked with a smile.

"Yes—he tends to wear his heart on his sleeve, the honest sailor. For the other, we rely on the word of Madame Croft. Now, if Charles Vyse felt that he were supplanted, would he be so powerfully affected that he would kill his cousin rather than let her become the wife of another man?"

"It sounds very melodramatic," I said doubtfully.

"It sounds, you would say, unEnglish. I agree. But even the English have emotions. And a type, such as Charles Vyse, is the most likely to have them. He is a repressed young man. One who does not show his feelings easily. Such often have the most violent feelings. I would never suspect the Commander Challenger of murder for emotional reasons. No, no, he is not the type. But with Charles Vyse—yes, it is possible. But it does not entirely satisfy me.

"Another motive for crime—Jealousy. I separate it from the last, because Jealousy may not, necessarily, be a sexual emotion. There is envy—envy of possession—of supremacy. Such a jealousy as drove the Iago of your great Shakspere to one of the cleverest crimes (speaking from the professional point of view) that has ever been committed."

"Why was it so clever?" I asked momentarily diverted.

"*Parbleu*—because he got others to execute it. Imagine a criminal nowadays on whom one was unable to put the handcuffs because he had never done anything himself. But this is not the subject we were discussing. Can jealousy, of any kind, be responsible for this crime? Who has reason to envy Mademoiselle? Another woman? There is only Madame Rice, and as far as we can see, there was no rivalry between the two women. But again, that is only 'as far as we can see.' There may be something there.

"Lastly—Fear. Does Mademoiselle Nick, by any chance, hold somebody's secret in her power? Does she know something which if it were known, might ruin another life? If so, I think we can say very definitely, that she herself is unaware of it. But that might be, you know. That might be. And if so, it makes it very difficult. Because, whilst she holds the clue in her hands, she holds it unconsciously and will be quite unable to tell us what it is."

"You really think that is possible?"

"It is a hypothesis. I am driven to it by the difficulty of finding a reasonable theory elsewhere. When you have eliminated other possibilities you turn to the one that is left and say—since the other is not—this must be so. . . ."

He was silent a long time.

At last, rousing himself from his absorption, he drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write.

"What are you writing?" I asked curiously.

"Mon ami, I am composing a list. It is a list of people surrounding Mademoiselle Buckley. Within that list, if my theory is correct, there must be the name of the murderer."

He continued to write for perhaps twenty minutes—then shoved the sheets of paper across to me.

"Voilà, mon ami. See what you make of it."

The following is a reproduction of the paper.

A. Ellen.
B. Her gardener husband.
C. Their child.
D. Mr Croft.
E. Mrs Croft.
F. Mrs Rice.
G. Mr Lazarus.
H. Commander Challenger.
I. Mr Charles Vyse.
J. ?

REMARKS.

A. *Ellen.* Suspicious circumstances. Her attitude and words on hearing of the crime. Best opportunity of anyone to have staged accidents and to have known of pistol *but* unlikely to have tampered with car, and general mentality of crime seems above her level.
Motive. None—unless Hate arising out of some incident unknown.
Note. Further inquiries as to her antecedents and general relations with N.B.

B. *Her husband.* Same as above. More likely to have tampered with car.
Note. Should be interviewed.

C. *Child.* Can be ruled out.
Note. Should be interviewed. Might give valuable information.

D. *Mr Croft.* Only suspicious circumstance. The fact that we met him mounting the stair to bedroom floor. Had ready explanation which may be true. But it may not! Nothing known of antecedents.
Motive. None.

E. *Mrs Croft.* Suspicious circumstances. None.
Motive. None.

F. *Mrs Rice.* Suspicious circumstances. Full opportunity. Asked N.B. to fetch wrap. Has deliberately tried to create impression that N.B. is a liar and her account of "accidents" not to be relied on. Was not at Tavistock when accidents occurred. Where was she?
Motive. Gain? Very slight. *Jealousy?* Possible but nothing known. *Fear?* Also possible, but nothing known.
Note. Converse with N.B. on subject. See if any light is thrown upon matter. Possibly something to do with F.R.'s marriage.

G. *Mr Lazarus.* Suspicious circumstances. General opportunity. Offer to buy picture. Said brakes of car were quite all right (according to F.R.). May have been in neighbourhood prior to Friday.
Motive. None—unless profit on picture. *Fear?*—unlikely.
Note. Find out where J.L. was before arriving at St. Loo. Find out financial position of Aaron Lazarus & Son.

H. *Commander Challenger.* Suspicious circumstances. None. Was in neighbourhood all last week, so opportunity for "accidents" good. Arrived half an hour after murder.
Motive. None.

I. *Mr Vyse.* Suspicious circumstances. Was absent from office at time when shot was fired in garden of Hotel. Opportunity good. Statement about selling of End House open to doubt. Of a repressed temperament. Would probably know about pistol.
Motive. Gain? (slight) *Love or Hate?* Possible with one of his temperament. *Fear?* Unlikely.
Note. Find out who held mortgage. Find out position of Vyse's firm.

J. *?* There *could* be a J.: e. g. an outsider. *But* with a link in the form of one of the foregoing. If so, probably connected with A. D. and E. or F. The existence of J. would explain (1) Ellen's lack of surprise at crime and her pleasurable satisfaction. (But that might be

> due to natural pleasurable excitement of her class over deaths.) (2) The reason for Croft and his wife coming to live in Lodge. (3) Might supply motive for F.R.'s *fear* of secret being revealed or for *jealousy.*

Poirot watched me as I read.

"It is very English, is it not?" he remarked with pride. "I am more English when I write than when I speak."

"It's an excellent piece of work," I said warmly. "It sets all the possibilities out most clearly."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, as he took it back from me. "And one name leaps to the eye, my friend. Charles Vyse. He has the best opportunities. We have given him the choice of two motives. *Ma foi*—if that was a list of racehorses, he would start favourite, *n'est ce pas?*"

"He is certainly the most likely suspect."

"You have a tendency, Hastings, to prefer the least likely. That, no doubt, is from reading too many detective stories. In real life, nine times out of ten, it is the most likely and the most obvious person who commits the crime."

"But you don't really think that is so this time?"

"There is only one thing that is against it. The boldness of the crime! That has stood out from the first. Because of that, as I say, the motive cannot be obvious."

"Yes, that is what you said at first."

"And that is what I say again."

With a sudden brusque gesture he crumpled the sheets of paper and threw them on the floor.

"No," he said, as I uttered an exclamation of protest. "That list has been in vain. Still, it has cleared my mind. Order and method! That is the first stage. To arrange the facts with neatness and precision. The next stage—"

"Yes?"

"The next stage is that of the psychology. The correct employment of the little grey cells! I advise you, Hastings, to go to bed."

"No," I said. "Not unless you do. I'm not going to leave you."

"Most faithful of dogs! But see you, Hastings, you cannot assist me to think. That is all I am going to do—think."

I still shook my head.

"You might want to discuss some point with me."

"Well—well—you are a loyal friend. Take at least, I beg of you, the easy chair."

That proposal I did accept. Presently the room began to swim and dip.

The last thing I remember was seeing Poirot carefully retrieving the crumpled sheets of paper from the floor and putting them away tidily in the waste paper basket.

Then I must have fallen asleep.

CHAPTER X

NICK'S SECRET

IT WAS daylight when I awoke.

Poirot was still sitting where he had been the night before. His attitude was the same, but in his face was a difference. His eyes were shining with that queer cat-like green light that I knew so well.

I struggled to an upright position, feeling very stiff and uncomfortable. Sleeping in a chair is a proceeding not to be recommended at my time of life. Yet one thing at least resulted from it—I awoke not in that pleasant state of lazy somnolence but with a mind and brain as active as when I fell asleep.

"Poirot," I cried. "You have thought of something."

He nodded. He leaned forward tapping the table in front of him.

"Tell me, Hastings, the answer to these three questions. Why has Mademoiselle Nick been sleeping badly lately? Why did she buy a black evening dress—she never wears black? Why did she say last night 'I have nothing to live for—now?' "

I stared. The question seemed beside the point.

"Answer those questions, Hastings, answer them?"

"Well—as to the first—she said she had been worried lately."

"Precisely. What has she been worried about?"

"And the black dress—well, everybody wants a change sometimes."

"For a married man, you have very little appreciation of feminine psychology. If a woman thinks she does not look well in a colour, she refuses to wear it."

"And the last—well, it was a natural thing to say after that awful shock."

"No, *mon ami,* it was not a natural thing to say. To be horror-struck by her cousin's death, to reproach herself for it—yes, all that is natural enough. But the other, no. She spoke of life with weariness—as of a thing no longer dear to her. Never before had she displayed that attitude. She had been defiant—yes, she had snapped the fingers, yes—and then, when that broke down, she was afraid. Afraid, mark you, because life was sweet and she did not wish to die. But weary of life—no! That never! Even before dinner that was not so. We have there, Hastings, a *psychological change.* And that is interesting. What was it caused her point of view to change?"

"The shock of her cousin's death."

"I wonder. It was the shock that loosed her tongue. But suppose the change was before that. Is there anything else could account for it?"

"I don't know of anything."

"Think, Hastings. Use your little grey cells."

"Really—"

"What was the last moment we had the opportunity of observing her?"

"Well, actually, I suppose, at dinner."

"Exactly. After that, we only saw her receiving guests, making them welcome—purely a formal attitude. What happened at the end of dinner, Hastings?"

"She went to telephone," I said slowly.

"*À la bonheur.* You have got there at last. She went to telephone. And she was absent a long time. Twenty minutes at least. That is a long time for a telephone call. Who spoke to her over the telephone? What did they say? Did she really telephone? We have got to find out, Hastings, what happened in that twenty minutes. For there, or so I fully believe, we shall find the clue we seek."

"You really think so?"

"*Mais oui, mais oui!* All along, Hastings, I have told you that Mademoiselle has been keeping something back. She doesn't think it has any connexion with the murder—but I, Hercule Poirot, know better! It must have a connexion. For all along, I have been conscious that there is a factor lacking. If there were not a factor lacking—why then, the whole thing would be plain to me! And as it is not plain to me—*eh bien*—then the missing factor is the key-stone of the mystery! I know I am right, Hastings.

"I must know the answer to those three questions. And then—and then —I shall begin to see. . . ."

"Well," I said, stretching my stiffened limbs. "I think a bath and a shave are indicated."

By the time I had had a bath and changed into day clothing I felt better. The stiffness and weariness of a night passed in uncomfortable conditions passed off. I arrived at the breakfast table feeling that one drink of hot coffee would restore me to my normal self.

I glanced at the paper, but there was little news in it beyond the fact that Michael Seton's death was now definitely confirmed. The intrepid airman had perished. I wondered whether, tomorrow, new headlines would have sprung into being. "GIRL MURDERED DURING FIREWORK PARTY. MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY." Something like that.

I had just finished breakfast when Frederica Rice came up to my table.

She was wearing a plain little frock of black merocain with a little soft pleated white collar. Her fairness was more evident than ever.

"I wanted to see M. Poirot, Captain Hastings. Is he up yet, do you know?"

"I will take you up with me now," I said. "We shall find him in the sitting-room."

"Thank you."

"I hope," I said, as we left the dining-room together, "that you didn't sleep too badly?"

"It was a shock," she said in a meditative voice. "But of course I didn't know the poor girl. It's not as though it had been Nick."

"I suppose you'd never met this girl before?"

"Once—at Scarborough. She came over to lunch with Nick."

"It will be a terrible blow to her father and mother," I said.

"Dreadful."

But she said it very impersonally. She was, I fancied, an egoist. Nothing was very real to her that did not concern herself.

Poirot had finished his breakfast and was sitting reading the morning paper. He rose and greeted Frederica with all his customary Gallic politeness.

"Madame," he said. *"Enchanté!"*

He drew forward a chair.

She thanked him with a very faint smile and sat down. Her two hands rested on the arms of the chair. She sat there very upright looking straight in front of her. She did not rush into speech. There was something a little frightening about her stillness and aloofness.

"M. Poirot," she said at last. "I suppose there is no doubt that this—sad business last night was all part and parcel of the same thing? I mean—that the intended victim was really Nick?"

"I should say, Madame, that there was no doubt at all."

Frederica frowned a little.

"Nick bears a charmed life," she said.

There was some curious undercurrent in her voice that I could not understand.

"Luck, they say, goes in cycles," remarked Poirot.

"Perhaps. It is certainly useless to fight against it."

Now there was only weariness in her tone. After a moment or two, she went on.

"I must beg your pardon, M. Poirot. Nick's pardon, too. Up till last night I did not believe. I never dreamed that the danger was—serious."

"Is that so, Madame?"

"I see now that everything will have to be gone into—carefully. And I imagine that Nick's immediate circle of friends will not be immune from suspicion. Ridiculous, of course, but there it is. Am I right, M. Poirot?"

"You are very intelligent, Madame."

"You asked me some questions about Tavistock the other day, M. Poirot. As you will find out sooner or later, I might as well tell you the truth now. I was not at Tavistock."

"No, Madame?"

"I motored down to this part of the world with Mr Lazarus early last week. We did not wish to arouse more comment than necessary. We stayed at a little place called Shellacombe."

"That is, I think, about seven miles from here, Madame?"

"About that—yes."

Still that quiet far away weariness.

"May I be impertinent, Madame?"

"Is there such a thing—in these days?"

"Perhaps you are right, Madame. How long have you and M. Lazarus been friends?"

"I met him six months ago."

"And you—care for him, Madame?"

Frederica shrugged her shoulders.

"He is—rich."

"Oh! là là," cried Poirot. "That is an ugly thing to say."

She seemed faintly amused.

"Isn't it better to say it myself—than to have you say it for me?"

"Well—there is always that, of course. May I repeat, Madame, that you are very intelligent."

"You will give me a diploma soon," said Frederica and rose.

"There is nothing more you wish to tell me, Madame?"

"I do not think so—no. I am going to take some flowers round to Nick and see how she is."

"Ah, that is very *aimable* of you. Thank you, Madame, for your frankness."

She glanced at him sharply, seemed about to speak, then thought better of it and went out of the room, smiling faintly at me as I held the door open for her.

"She is intelligent," said Poirot. "Yes, but so is Hercule Poirot!"

"What do you mean?"

"That it is all very well and very pretty to force the richness of M. Lazarus down my throat—"

"I must say that rather disgusted me."

"Mon cher, always you have the right reaction in the wrong place. It is not, for the moment, a question of good taste or otherwise. If Madame Rice has a devoted friend who is rich and can give her all she needs—why then obviously Madame Rice would not need to murder her dearest friend for a mere pittance."

"Oh!" I said.

"Précisément! 'Oh!' "

"Why didn't you stop her going to the Nursing Home?"

"Why should I show my hand? Is it Hercule Poirot who prevents Mademoiselle Nick from seeing her friends? *Quelle idée!* It is the doctors and the nurses. Those tiresome nurses! So full of rules and regulations and 'doctor's orders'."

"You're not afraid that they may let her in after all? Nick might insist."

"Nobody will be let in, my dear Hastings, but you and me. And for that matter, the sooner we make our way there, the better."

The sitting-room door flew open and George Challenger barged in. His tanned face was alive with indignation.

"Look here, M. Poirot," he said. "What's the meaning of this? I rang up that damned Nursing Home where Nick is. Asked how she was and what time I could come round and see her. And they say the doctor won't allow any visitors. I want to know the meaning of that? To put it plainly, is this your work? Or is Nick really ill from shock?"

"I assure you, Monsieur, that I do not lay down rules for nursing homes. I would not dare. Why not ring up the good doctor—what was his name now?—Ah! yes, Graham."

"I have. He says she's going on as well as could be expected—usual stuff. But I know all the tricks—my uncle's a doctor. Harley Street. Nerve Specialist. Psycho-analysis—all the rest of it. Putting relations and friends off with soothing words. I've heard about it all. I don't believe Nick isn't up to seeing anyone. I believe you're at the bottom of this, M. Poirot."

Poirot smiled at him in a very kindly fashion. Indeed, I have always observed that Poirot has a kindly feeling for a lover.

"Now listen to me, *mon ami,"* he said. "If one guest is admitted, others cannot be kept out. You comprehend? It must be all or none. We want Mademoiselle's safety, you and I, do we not? Exactly. Then, you understand—it must be none."

"I get you," said Challenger slowly. "But then—"

"Chut! We will say no more. We will forget even what we have said. The prudence, the extreme prudence, is what is needed at present."

"I can hold my tongue," said the sailor quietly.

He turned away to the door, pausing as he went out to say:

"No embargo on flowers, is there? So long as they are not white ones."

Poirot smiled.

"And now," he said as the door shut behind the impetuous Challenger. "Whilst M. Challenger and Madame and perhaps M. Lazarus all encounter each other in the flower shop, you and I will drive quietly to our destination."

"And ask for the answer to the three questions?" I said.

"Yes. We will ask. Though, as a matter of fact, I know the answer."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But when did you find out?"

"Whilst I was eating my breakfast, Hastings. It stared me in the face."

"Tell me."

"No, I will leave you to hear it from Mademoiselle."

Then, as if to distract my mind, he pushed an open letter across to me.

It was a report by the expert Poirot had sent to examine the picture of old Nicholas Buckley. It stated definitely that the picture was worth at most twenty pounds.

"So that is one matter cleared up," said Poirot.

"No mouse in that mousehole," I said remembering a metaphor of Poirot's on one past occasion.

"Ah! you remember that? No, as you say, no mouse in that mousehole. Twenty pounds and M. Lazarus offered fifty. What an error of judgment for a seemingly astute young man. But there, there, we must start on our errand."

The Nursing Home was set high on a hill overlooking the bay. A white coated orderly received us. We were put into a little room downstairs and presently a brisk looking nurse came to us.

One glance at Poirot seemed to be enough. She had clearly received her instructions from Dr Graham together with a minute description of the little detective. She even concealed a smile.

"Miss Buckley has passed a very fair night," she said. "Come up, will you?"

In a pleasant room with the sun streaming into it, we found Nick. In the narrow iron bed, she looked like a tired child. Her face was white and her eyes were suspiciously red, and she seemed listless and weary.

"It's good of you to come," she said in a flat voice.

Poirot took her hand in both of his.

"Courage, Mademoiselle. There is always something to live for."

The words startled her. She looked up in his face.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh!"

"Will you not tell me now, Mademoiselle, what it was that has been worrying you lately? Or shall I guess? And may I offer you, Mademoiselle, my very deepest sympathy."

Her face flushed.

"So you know. Oh! well, it doesn't matter who knows now. Now that it's all over. Now that I shall never see him again."

Her voice broke.

"Courage, Mademoiselle."

"I haven't got any courage left. I've used up every bit in these last weeks. Hoping and hoping and—just lately—hoping against hope."

I stared. I could not understand one word.

"Regard the poor Hastings," said Poirot. "He does not know what we are talking about."

Her unhappy eyes met mine.

"Michael Seton, the airman," she said. "I was engaged to him—and he's dead."

CHAPTER XI

THE MOTIVE

I WAS dumbfounded.

I turned on Poirot.

"Is that what you meant?"

"Yes, *mon ami.* This morning—I knew."

"How did you know? How did you guess? You said it stared you in the face at breakfast."

"So it did, my friend. From the front page of the newspaper. I remembered the conversation at dinner last night—and I saw everything."

He turned to Nick again.

"You heard the news last night?"

"Yes. On the wireless. I made an excuse about the telephone. I wanted to hear the news alone—in case . . ." She swallowed hard. "And I heard it . . ."

"I know. I know." He took her hand in both of his.

"It was—pretty ghastly. And all the people arriving. I don't know how I got through it. It all felt like a dream. I could see myself from outside—behaving just as usual. It was queer somehow."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

"And then, when I went to fetch Freddie's wrap—I broke down for a minute. I pulled myself together quite quickly. But Maggie kept calling up about her coat. And then at last she took my shawl and went, and I put on some powder and some rouge and followed her out. And there she was—dead. . . ."

"Yes, yes, it must have been a terrible shock."

"You don't understand. I was angry! I wished it had been me! I wanted to be dead—and there I was—alive and perhaps to live for years! And Michael dead—drowned far away in the Pacific."

"Pauvre enfant."

"I don't want to be alive. I don't want to live, I tell you!" she cried rebelliously.

"I know—I know. To all of us, Mademoiselle, there comes a time when death is preferable to life. But it passes—sorrow passes and grief. You cannot believe that now, I know. It is useless for an old man like me to talk. Idle words—that is what you think—idle words."

"You think I'll forget—and marry someone else. Never!"

She looked rather lovely as she sat up in bed, her two hands clenched and her cheeks burning.

Poirot said gently.

"No, no. I am not thinking anything of the kind. You are very lucky, Mademoiselle. You have been loved by a brave man—a hero. How did you come to meet him?"

"It was at Le Touquet—last September. Nearly a year ago."

"And you became engaged—when?"

"Just after Christmas. But it had to be a secret."

"Why was that?"

"Michael's uncle—old Sir Matthew Seton. He loved birds and hated women."

"Ah! ce n'est pas raisonable!"

"Well—I don't mean quite that. He was a complete crank. Thought women ruined a man's life. And Michael was absolutely dependent on him. He was frightfully proud of Michael and it was he who financed the building of the Albatross and the expenses of the Round the World flight. It was the dearest dream of his life as well as of Michael's. If Michael had pulled it off—well, then he could have asked his uncle anything. And even if old Sir Matthew had still cut up rough, well, it wouldn't have really mattered. Michael would have been made—a kind of World Hero. His uncle would have come round in the end."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"But Michael said it would be fatal if anything leaked out. We must keep it a dead secret. And I did. I never told anyone—not even Freddie."

Poirot groaned.

"If only you had told me, Mademoiselle."

Nick stared at him.

"But what difference would it have made? It couldn't have anything to do with these mysterious attacks on me? No, I'd promised Michael—and I kept my word. But it was awful—the anxiety, wondering and getting in a state the whole time. And everyone saying one was so nervy. And being unable to explain."

"Yes, I comprehend all that."

"He was missing once before, you know. Crossing the desert on the way to India. That was pretty awful, and then after all, it was all right. His machine was damaged, but it was put right, and he went on. And I kept saying to myself that it would be the same this time. Everyone said he must be dead—and I kept telling myself that he must be all right really. And then—last night . . ."

Her voice trailed away.

"You had hoped up till then?"

"I don't know. I think it was more that I refused to believe. It was awful never being able to talk to anyone."

"Yes, I can imagine that. Were you never tempted to tell Madame Rice, for instance."

"Sometimes I wanted to frightfully."

"You do not think she—guessed?"

"I don't think so." Nick considered the idea carefully. "She never said anything. Of course she used to hint things sometimes. About our being great friends and all that."

"You never considered telling her when M. Seton's uncle died? You knew that he died about a week ago?"

"I know. He had an operation or something. I suppose I might have told anybody then. But it wouldn't have been a nice way of doing it, would it? I mean it would have seemed rather boastful—to do it just then—when all the papers were full of Michael. And reporters would have come and interviewed me. It would all have been rather cheap. And Michael would have hated it."

"I agree with you, Mademoiselle. You could not have announced it publicly. I only meant that you could have spoken of it privately to a friend."

"I did sort of hint to one person," said Nick, "I—thought it was only fair. But I don't know how much he—the person took in."

Poirot nodded.

"Are you on good terms with your cousin, M. Vyse?" he asked with a rather abrupt change of subject.

"Charles? What put him into your head?"

"I was just wondering—that was all."

"Charles means well," said Nick. "He's a frightful stick, of course. Never moves out of his place. He disapproves of me, I think."

"Oh! Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle. And I hear that he has laid all his devotion at your feet!"

"Disapproving of a person doesn't keep you from having a pash for them. Charles thinks my mode of life is reprehensible and he disapproves of my cocktails, my complexion, my friends and my conversation. But he still feels my fatal fascination. He always hopes to reform me, I think."

She paused and then said, with a ghost of a twinkle.

"Who have you been pumping to get the local information?"

"You must not give me away, Mademoiselle. I had a little conversation with the Australian lady, Madame Croft."

"She's rather an old dear—when one has time for her. Terribly sentimental. Love and home and children—you know the sort of thing."

"I am old-fashioned and sentimental myself, Mademoiselle."

"Are you? I should have said that Captain Hastings was the sentimental one of you two."

I blushed indignantly.

"He is furious," said Poirot eyeing my discomfiture with a good deal of pleasure. "But you are right, Mademoiselle. Yes, you are right."

"Not at all," I said angrily.

"Hastings has a singularly beautiful nature. It has been the greatest hindrance to me at times."

"Don't be absurd, Poirot."

"He is, to begin with, reluctant to see evil anywhere, and when he does see it his righteous indignation is so great that he is incapable of dissembling. Altogether a rare and beautiful nature. No, *mon ami,* I will not permit you to contradict me. It is as I say."

"You've both been very kind to me," said Nick gently.

"Là, là, Mademoiselle. That is nothing. We have much more to do. To begin with, you will remain here. You will obey orders. You will do what I tell you. At this juncture I must not be hampered."

Nick sighed wearily.

"I'll do anything you like. I don't care what I do."

"You will see no friends for the present."

"I don't care. I don't want to see anyone."

"For you the passive part—for us the active one. Now, Mademoiselle, I am going to leave you. I will not intrude longer upon your sorrow."

He moved towards the door, pausing with his hand on the handle to say over his shoulder.

"By the way, you once mentioned a will you made. Where is it, this will?"

"Oh! it's knocking round somewhere."

"At End House?"

"Yes."

"In a safe? Locked up in your desk?"

"Well, I really don't know. It's somewhere about." She frowned. "I'm frightfully untidy, you know. Papers and things like that would be mostly in the writing-table in the library. That's where most of the bills are. The will is probably with them. Or it might be in my bedroom."

"You permit me to make the search—yes?"

"If you want to—yes. Look at anything you like."

"*Merci, Mademoiselle.* I will avail myself of your permission."

CHAPTER XII

ELLEN

POIROT said no word till we had emerged from the Nursing Home into the outer air. Then he caught me by the arm.

"You see, Hastings? You see? Ah! *Sacré tonnerre!* I was right! I was right! Always I knew there was something lacking—some piece of the puzzle that was not there. And without that missing piece the whole thing was meaningless."

His almost despairing triumph was double Dutch to me. I could not see that anything very epoch making had occurred.

"It was there all the time. And I could not see it. But how should I? To know there is *something*—that, yes—but to know what that something is. *Ah!—c'est bien plus difficile."*

"Do you mean that this has some direct bearing on the crime?"

"Ma foi, do you not see?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't."

"Is it possible? Why, it gives us what we have been looking for—the motive—the hidden obscure motive!"

"I may be very dense, but I can't see it. Do you mean jealousy of some kind?"

"Jealousy? No, no, my friend. The usual motive—the inevitable motive. Money, my friend, money!"

I stared. He went on, speaking more calmly.

"Listen, *mon ami.* Just over a week ago Sir Matthew Seton dies. And Sir Matthew Seton was a millionaire—one of the richest men in England."

"Yes, but—"

"Attendez. One step at a time. He has a nephew whom he idolizes and to whom, we may safely assume, he has left his vast fortune."

"But—"

"Mais oui—legacies, yes, an endowment to do with his hobby, yes, but the bulk of the money would go to Michael Seton. Last Tuesday, Michael Seton is reported missing—*and on Wednesday the attacks on Mademoiselle's life begin.* Supposing, Hastings, that Michael Seton made a will before he started on this flight, and that in that will he left all he had to his fiancée."

"That's pure supposition."

"It is supposition—yes. But it must be so. Because, if it is not so, there is no meaning in anything that has happened. It is no paltry inheritance that is at stake. It is an enormous fortune."

I was silent for some minutes turning the matter over in my mind. It seemed to me that Poirot was leaping at conclusions in a most reckless manner, and yet I was secretly convinced that he was right. It was his extraordinary flair for being right that influenced me. Yet it seemed to me that there was a good deal to be proved still.

"But if nobody knew of the engagement," I argued.

"Pah! Somebody did know. For the matter of that, somebody always does know. If they do not know, they guess. Madame Rice suspected. Mademoiselle Nick admitted as much. She may have had means of turning those suspicions into certainties."

"How?"

"Well, for one thing, there must have been letters from Michael Seton to Mademoiselle Nick. They had been engaged some time. And her best friend could not call that young lady anything but careless. She leaves things here and there, and everywhere. I doubt if she has ever locked up anything in her life. Oh! yes, there would be means of making sure."

"And Frederica Rice would know about the will that her friend had made?"

"Doubtless. Oh! yes, it narrows down now. You remember my list—a list of persons numbered from A to J. It has narrowed down to only two persons. I dismiss the servants. I dismiss the Commander Challenger—even though he did take one hour and a half to reach here from Plymouth—and the distance is only thirty miles. I dismiss the long-nosed M. Lazarus who offered fifty pounds for a picture that was only worth twenty (it is odd, that, when you come to think of it—most uncharacteristic of his race). I dismiss the Australians—so hearty and so pleasant. I keep two people on my list still."

"One is Frederica Rice," I said slowly.

I had a vision of her face, the golden hair, the white fragility of the features.

"Yes. She is indicated very clearly. However carelessly worded Mademoiselle's will may have been, she would be plainly indicated as residuary legatee. Apart from End House, everything was to go to her. If Mademoiselle Nick instead of Mademoiselle Maggie had been shot last night, Madame Rice would be a rich woman today."

"I can hardly believe it!"

"You mean that you can hardly believe that a beautiful woman can be a murderess? One often has a little difficulty with members of a jury on that account. But you may be right. There is still another suspect."

"Who?"

"Charles Vyse."

"But he only inherits the house."

"Yes—but he may not know that. Did he make Mademoiselle's will for her? I think not. If so, it would be in his keeping not 'Knocking around somewhere' or whatever the phrase was that Mademoiselle used. So, you see, Hastings, it is quite probable that he knows nothing about that will. He may believe that she has never made a will and that, in that case, he will inherit as next of kin."

"You know," I said. "That really seems to me much more probable."

"That is your romantic mind, Hastings. The wicked solicitor! A familiar figure in fiction. If as well as being a solicitor he has an impassive face, it makes the matter almost certain. It is true that, in some ways, he is more in the picture than Madame. He would be more likely to know about the pistol and more likely to use one."

"And to send the boulder crashing down."

"Perhaps. Though, as I have told you, much can be done by leverage. And the fact that the boulder was dislodged at the wrong minute, and consequently missed Mademoiselle, is more suggestive of feminine agency. The idea of tampering with the interior of a car seems masculine in conception—though many women are as good mechanics as men nowadays. On the other hand, there are one or two gaps in the theory against M. Vyse."

"Such as—?"

"He is less likely to have known of the engagement than Madame. And there is another point. His action was rather precipitate."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, until last night there was no certitude that Seton was dead. To act rashly, without due assurance, seems very uncharacteristic of the legal mind."

"Yes," I said. "A woman would jump to conclusions."

"Exactly. *Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut.* That is the attitude."

"It's really amazing the way Nick has escaped. It seems almost incredible."

And suddenly I remembered the tone in Frederica's voice as she had said: "Nick bears a charmed life."

I shivered a little.

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "And I can take no credit to myself. Which is humiliating."

"Providence," I murmured.

"Ah! *mon ami,* I would not put on the shoulders of the good God the burden of men's wrong doing. You say that in your Sunday morning voice of thankfulness—without reflecting that what you are really saying is that *le bon Dieu* has killed Miss Maggie Buckley."

"Really, Poirot!"

"Really, my friend! But I will not sit back and say '*le bon Dieu* has arranged everything, I will not interfere.' Because I am convinced that *le bon Dieu* created Hercule Poirot for the express purpose of interfering. It is my *métier.*"

We had been slowly ascending the zigzag path up the cliff. It was at this juncture that we passed through the little gate into the grounds of End House.

"Pouf," said Poirot. "That ascent is a steep one. I am hot. My moustaches are limp. Yes, as I was saying just now, I am on the side of the innocent. I am on the side of Mademoiselle Nick because she was attacked. I am on the side of Mademoiselle Maggie because she has been killed."

"And you are against Frederica Rice and Charles Vyse."

"No, no, Hastings. I keep an open mind. I say only that at the moment one of those two is indicated. Chut!"

We had come out on the strip of lawn by the house and a man was driving a mowing machine. He had a long stupid face and lack-lustre eyes. Beside him was a small boy of about ten, ugly but intelligent looking.

It crossed my mind that we had not heard the mowing machine in action, but I presumed that the gardener was not overworking himself. He had probably been resting from his labours, and had sprung into action on hearing our voices approaching.

"Good-morning," said Poirot.

"Good-morning, sir."

"You are the gardener, I suppose. The husband of Madame who works in the house."

"He's my Dad," said the small boy.

"That's right, sir," said the man. "You'll be the foreign gentleman, I take it, that's really a detective. Is there any news of the young mistress, sir?"

"I come from seeing her at the immediate moment. She has passed a satisfactory night."

"We've had policemen here," said the small boy. "That's where the lady was killed. Here by the steps. I seen a pig killed once, haven't I, Dad?"

"Ah!" said his father unemotionally.

"Dad used to kill pigs when he worked on a farm. Didn't you, Dad? I seen a pig killed. I liked it."

"Young 'uns like to see pigs killed," said the man, as though stating one of the unalterable facts of nature.

"Shot with a pistol, the lady was," continued the boy. "She didn't have her throat cut. No."

We passed on to the house, and I felt thankful to get away from the ghoulish child.

Poirot entered the drawing-room, the windows of which were open and rang the bell. Ellen, neatly attired in black came in answer to the bell. She showed no surprise at seeing us.

Poirot explained that we were here by permission of Miss Buckley to make a search of the house.

"Very good, sir."

"The police have finished?"

"They said they had seen everything they wanted, sir. They've been about the garden since very early in the morning. I don't know whether they've found anything."

She was about to leave the room when Poirot stopped her with a question.

"Were you very surprised last night when you heard Miss Buckley had been shot?"

"Yes, sir, very surprised. Miss Maggie was a nice young lady, sir. I can't imagine anyone being so wicked as to want to harm her."

"If it had been anyone else, you would not have been so surprised—eh?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir?"

"When I came into the hall last night," I said. "You asked at once whether anyone had been hurt. Were you expecting anything of the kind?"

She was silent. Her fingers pleated a corner of her apron. She shook her head and murmured.

"You gentlemen wouldn't understand."

"Yes, yes," said Poirot. "I would understand. However fantastic what you may say, I would understand."

She looked at him doubtfully, then seemed to make up her mind to trust him.

"You see, sir," she said. "This isn't a good house."

I was surprised and a little contemptuous. Poirot, however, seemed to find the remark not in the least unusual.

"You mean it is an old house."

"Yes, sir, not a good house."

"You have been here long?"

"Six years, sir. But I was here as a girl. In the kitchen as kitchen maid. That was in the time of old Sir Nicholas. It was the same then."

Poirot looked at her attentively.

"In an old house," he said. "There is sometimes an atmosphere of evil."

"That's it, sir," said Ellen eagerly. "Evil. Bad thoughts and bad deeds too. It's like dry rot in a house, sir, you can't get it out. It's a sort of feeling in the air. I always knew something bad would happen in this house, some day."

"Well, you have been proved right."

"Yes, sir."

There was a very slight underlying satisfaction in her tone, the satisfaction of one whose gloomy prognostications have been shown to be correct.

"But you didn't think it would be Miss Maggie."

"No, indeed, I didn't, sir. Nobody hated her—I'm sure of it."

It seemed to me that in those words was a clue. I expected Poirot to follow it up, but to my surprise he shifted to quite a different subject.

"You didn't hear the shots fired?"

"I couldn't have told with the fireworks going on. Very noisy they were."

"You weren't out watching them?"

"No, I hadn't finished clearing up dinner."

"Was the waiter helping you?"

"No, sir, he'd gone out into the garden to have a look at the fireworks."

"But you didn't go."

"No, sir."

"Why was that?"

"I wanted to get finished."

"You don't care for fireworks?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it wasn't that. But you see, there's two nights of them, and William and I get the evening off tomorrow and go down into the town and see them from there."

"I comprehend. And you heard Mademoiselle Maggie asking for her coat and unable to find it?"

"I heard Miss Nick run upstairs, sir, and Miss Buckley call up from the front hall saying she couldn't find something and I heard her say 'All right—she'd take the shawl—' "

"Pardon—" Poirot interrupted. "You did not endeavour to search for the coat for her—or get it from the car where it had been left."

"I had my work to do, sir."

"Quite so—and doubtless neither of the two young ladies asked you because they thought you were out looking at the fireworks?"

"Yes, sir."

"So that, other years, you have been out looking at the fireworks?"

A sudden flush came into her pale cheek.

"I don't know what you mean, sir. We're always allowed to go out into the garden. If I didn't feel like it this year, and would rather get on with my work and go to bed, well, that's my business, I imagine."

"Mais oui. Mais oui. I did not intend to offend you. Why should you not do as you prefer. To make a change, it is pleasant."

He paused and then added:

"Now another little matter in which I wonder whether you can help me. This is an old house. Are there, do you know, any secret chambers in it?"

"Well—there's a kind of sliding panel—in this very room. I remember being shown it as a girl. Only I can't remember just now where it is. Or was it in the library? I can't say, I'm sure."

"Big enough for a person to hide in?"

"Oh! no, indeed, sir! A little cupboard place—a kind of niche. About a foot square, sir, not more than that."

"Oh! that is not what I meant at all."

The blush rose to her face again.

"If you think I was hiding anywhere—I wasn't! I heard Miss Nick run down the stairs and out and I heard her cry out—and I came into the hall to see if—if anything was the matter. And that's the gospel truth, sir. That's the gospel truth."

CHAPTER XIII

LETTERS

HAVING successfully got rid of Ellen, Poirot turned a somewhat thoughtful face towards me.

"I wonder now—did she hear those shots? I think she did. She heard them, she opened the kitchen door. She heard Nick rush down the stairs and out and she herself came into the hall to find out what had happened. That is natural enough. But why did she not go out and watch the fireworks that evening? That is what I should like to know, Hastings."

"What was your idea in asking about a secret hiding place?"

"A mere fanciful idea that, after all, we might not have disposed of J."

"J?"

"Yes. The last person on my list. The problematical outsider. Supposing for some reason connected with Ellen, that J. had come to the house last night. He (I assume a he) conceals himself in a secret chamber in this room. A girl passes through whom he takes to be Nick. He follows her out—and shoots her. *Non—c'est idiot!* And anyway, we know that there is no hiding place. Ellen's decision to remain in the kitchen last night was a pure hazard. Come, let us search for the will of Mademoiselle Nick."

There were no papers in the drawing-room. We adjourned to the library, a rather dark room looking out on the drive. Here there was a large old-fashioned walnut bureau writing-table.

It took us some time to go through it. Everything was in complete confusion. Bills and receipts were mixed up together. Letters of invitation, letters pressing for payment of accounts, letters from friends.

"We will arrange these papers," said Poirot sternly, "with order and method."

He was as good as his word. Half an hour later, he sat back with a pleased expression on his face. Everything was neatly sorted, docketed and filed.

"C'est bien, ça. One thing is at least to the good. We have had to go through everything so thoroughly that there is no possibility of our having missed anything."

"No, indeed. Not that there's been much to find."

"Except possibly this."

He tossed across a letter. It was written in large sprawling handwriting, almost indecipherable.

Darling, Party was too, too marvellous. Feel rather a worm today. You were wise not to touch that stuff—don't ever start, darling. It's too damned hard to give up. I'm writing the boy friend to hurry up the supply. What Hell life is. Yours, Freddie.

"Dated last February," said Poirot thoughtfully. "She takes drugs, of course, I knew that as soon as I looked at her."

"Really? I never suspected such a thing."

"It is fairly obvious. You have only to look at her eyes. And then there are her extraordinary variations of mood. Sometimes she is all on edge, strung up—sometimes she is lifeless—inert."

"Drug taking affects the moral sense, does it not?"

"Inevitably. But I do not think Mrs Rice is a real addict. She is at the beginning—not the end."

"And Nick?"

"There are no signs of it. She may have attended a dope party now and then for fun, but she is no taker of drugs."

"I'm glad of that."

I remembered suddenly what Nick had said about Frederica that she was not always herself. Poirot nodded and tapped the letter he held.

"This is what she was referring to, undoubtedly. Well, we have drawn the blank, as you say, here. Let us go up to Mademoiselle's room."

There was a desk in Nick's room also, but comparatively little was kept in it. Here again, there was no sign of a will. We found the Registration book of her car and a perfectly good dividend warrant of a month back. Otherwise there was nothing of importance.

Poirot sighed in an exasperated fashion.

"The young girls—they are not properly trained nowadays. The order, the method, it is left out of their bringing up. She is charming, Mademoiselle Nick, but she is a feather head. Decidedly she is a feather head."

He was now going through the contents of a chest of drawers.

"Surely, Poirot," I said with some embarrassment, "those are underclothes."

He paused in surprise.

"And why not, my friend?"

"Don't you think—I mean—we can hardly—"

He broke into a roar of laughter.

"Decidedly, my poor Hastings, you belong to the Victorian era. Mademoiselle Nick would tell you so if she were here. In all probability she would say that you had the mind like the sink! Young ladies are not ashamed of their underclothes nowadays. The camisole, the cami-knicker, it is no longer a shameful secret. Every day, on the beach, all these garments will be discarded within a few feet of you. And why not?"

"I don't see any need for what you are doing."

"Écoutez, my friend. Clearly, she does not lock up her treasures, Mademoiselle Nick. If she wished to hide anything from sight—where would she hide it? Underneath the stockings and the petticoats. Ah! what have we here?"

He held up a packet of letters tied with a faded pink ribbon.

"The love letters of M. Michael Seton, if I mistake not."

Quite calmly, he untied the ribbon and began to open out the letters.

"Poirot," I cried scandalized. "You really can't do that. It isn't playing the game."

"I am not playing a game, *mon ami."* His voice rang out suddenly harsh and stern. "I am hunting down a murderer."

"Yes, but private letters—"

"May have nothing to tell me— On the other hand, they may. I must take every chance, my friend. Come, you might as well read them with me. Two pairs of eyes are no worse than one pair. Console yourself with the thought that the staunch Ellen probably knows them by heart."

I did not like it. Still I realized that in Poirot's position he could not afford to be squeamish, and I consoled myself by the quibble that Nick's last word had been "Look at anything you like."

The letters spread over several dates, beginning last winter. New Year's Day.

DARLING,

The New Year is in and I'm making good resolutions. It seems too wonderful to be true—that you should actually love me. You've made all the difference to my life. I believe we both knew—from the very first moment we met. Happy New Year, my lovely girl.

Yours for ever,
MICHAEL.

Feb. 8th.

DEAREST LOVE,

How I wish I could see you more often. This is pretty rotten, isn't it? I hate all this beastly concealment but I explained to you how things are. I know how much you hate lies and concealment. I do too. But honestly, it might upset the whole apple cart. Uncle Matthew has got an absolute bee in his bonnet about early marriages and the way they wreck a man's career. As though you could wreck mine, you dear angel.

Cheer up, darling. Everything will come right.

Yours,
MICHAEL.

March 2nd.

I oughtn't to write to you two days running, I know. But I must. When I was up yesterday I thought of you. I flew over Scarborough. Blessed, blessed, blessed Scarborough—the most wonderful place in the world. Darling, you don't know how I love you.

Yours,
MICHAEL.

April 18th.

DEAREST,

The whole thing is fixed up. Definitely. If I pull this off (and I shall pull it off) I shall be able to take a firm line with Uncle Matthew—and if he doesn't like it—well, what do I care? It's adorable of you to be so interested in my long technical descriptions of the Albatross. How I long to take you up in her. Someday! Don't for goodness' sake, worry about me. The thing isn't half so risky as it sounds. I simply couldn't get killed now that I know you care for me. Everything will be all right, sweetheart. Trust your

MICHAEL.

April 20th.

You angel—every word you say is true and I shall treasure that letter always. I'm not half good enough for you. You are so different from everybody else. I adore you.

Your,
MICHAEL.

The last was undated.

DEAREST,

Well—I'm off tomorrow. Feeling tremendously keen and excited and absolutely certain of success. The old Albatross is all tuned up. She won't let me down.

Cheer up, sweetheart, and don't worry. There's a risk, of course, but all life's risk really. By the way, somebody said I ought to make a will (tactful fellow—but he meant well) so I have—on a half sheet of notepaper and sent it to old Whitfield. I'd no time to go round there. Somebody once told me that a man made a will of three words "All to Mother" and it was legal all right. My will was rather like that—I remembered your name was really Magdala which was clever of me! A couple of the fellows witnessed it.

Don't take all this solemn talk about wills to heart, will you? (I didn't mean that pun. An accident.) I shall be as right as rain. I'll send you telegrams from India and Australia and so on. And keep up heart. *It's going to be all right.* See?

Good-night and God bless you,
MICHAEL.

Poirot folded the letters together again.

"You see, Hastings? I had to read them—to make sure. It is as I told you."

"Surely you could have found out some other way?"

"No, *mon cher,* that is just what I could not do. It had to be this way. We have now some very valuable evidence."

"In what way?"

"We now know that the fact of Michael's having made a will in favour of Mademoiselle Nick is actually recorded in writing. Anyone who had read those letters would know the fact. And with letters carelessly hidden like that, anyone could read them."

"Ellen?"

"Ellen, almost certainly, I should say. We will try a little experiment on her before passing out."

"There is no sign of the will."

"No, that is curious. But in all probability it is thrown on top of a bookcase, or inside a china jar. We must try to awaken Mademoiselle's memory on that point. At any rate, there is nothing more to be found here."

Ellen was dusting the hall as we descended.

Poirot wished her good-morning very pleasantly as we passed. He turned back from the front door to say:

"You knew, I suppose, that Miss Buckley was engaged to the airman, Michael Seton?"

She stared.

"What? The one there's all the fuss in the papers about?"

"Yes."

"Well, I never. To think of that. Engaged to Miss Nick."

"Complete and absolute surprise registered very convincingly," I remarked as we got outside.

"Yes. It really seemed genuine."

"Perhaps it was," I suggested.

"And that packet of letters reclining for months under the *lingerie?* No, *mon ami.*"

"All very well," I thought to myself. "But we are not all Hercule Poirots. We do not all go nosing into what does not concern us."

But I said nothing.

"This Ellen—she is an enigma," said Poirot. "I do not like it. There is something here that I do not understand."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING WILL

WE WENT straight back to the Nursing Home.

Nick looked rather surprised to see us.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," said Poirot, answering her look. "I am like the Jack in the Case. I pop up again. To begin with I will tell you that I have put the order in your affairs. Everything is now neatly arranged."

"Well, I expect it was about time," said Nick unable to help smiling. "Are you very tidy, M. Poirot?"

"Ask my friend Hastings here."

The girl turned an inquiring gaze on me.

I detailed some of Poirot's minor peculiarities—toast that had to be made from a square loaf—eggs matching in size—his objection to golf as a game "shapeless and haphazard" whose only redeeming feature was the tee boxes! I ended by telling her the famous case which Poirot had solved by his habit of straightening ornaments on the mantelpiece.

Poirot sat by smiling.

"He makes the good tale of it, yes," he said when I had finished. "But on the whole it is true. Figure to yourself, Mademoiselle, that I never cease trying to persuade Hastings to part his hair in the middle instead of on the side. See what an air—lop-sided and unsymmetrical—it gives him."

"Then you must disapprove of me, M. Poirot," said Nick. "I wear a side parting. And you must approve of Freddie who parts her hair in the middle."

"He was certainly admiring her the other evening," I put in maliciously. "Now I know the reason."

"C'est assez," said Poirot. "I am here on serious business. Mademoiselle, this will of yours, I find it not."

"Oh!" She wrinkled her brows. "But does it matter so much? After all, I'm not dead. And wills aren't really important till you are dead, are they?"

"That is correct. All the same, I interest myself in this will of yours. I have various little ideas concerning it. Think, Mademoiselle. Try to remember where you placed it—where you saw it last?"

"I don't suppose I put it anywhere particular," said Nick. "I never do put things in places. I probably shoved it into a drawer."

"You did not put it in the secret panel by any chance?"

"The secret what?"

"Your maid, Ellen, says that there is a secret panel in the drawing-room or the library."

"Nonsense," said Nick. "I've never heard of such a thing. Ellen said so?"

"Mais oui. It seems she was in service at End House as a young girl. The cook showed it to her."

"It's the first I've ever heard of it. I suppose Grandfather must have known about it, but, if so, he didn't tell me. And I'm sure he would have told me. M. Poirot, are you sure Ellen isn't making it all up?"

"No, Mademoiselle, I am not at all sure! *Il me semble* that there is something—odd about this Ellen of yours."

"Oh! I wouldn't call her odd. William's a half wit, and the child is a nasty little brute, but Ellen's all right. The essence of respectability."

"Did you give her leave to go out and see the fireworks last night, Mademoiselle?"

"Of course. They always do. They clear up afterwards."

"Yet she did not go out."

"Oh! yes, she did."

"How do you know, Mademoiselle?"

"Well—well—I suppose I don't know. I told her to go and she thanked me—and so of course I assumed that she did go."

"On the contrary—she remained in the house."

"But—how very odd!"

"You think it odd?"

"Yes, I do. I'm sure she's never done such a thing before. Did she say why?"

"She did not tell me the real reason—of that I am sure."

Nick looked at him questioningly.

"Is it—important?"

Poirot flung out his hands.

"That is just what I cannot say, Mademoiselle. *C'est curieux.* I leave it like that."

"This panel business too," said Nick reflectively. "I can't help thinking that's frightfully queer—and unconvincing. Did she show you where it was?"

"She said she couldn't remember."

"I don't believe there is such a thing."

"It certainly looks like it."

"She must be going batty, poor thing."

"She certainly recounts the histories! She said also that End House was not a good house to live in."

Nick gave a little shiver.

"Perhaps she's right there," she said slowly. "Sometimes I've felt that way myself. There's a queer feeling in that house. . . ."

Her eyes grew large and dark. They had a fated look. Poirot hastened to recall her to other topics.

"We have wandered from our subject, Mademoiselle. The will. The last will and testament of Magdala Buckley."

"I put that," said Nick with some pride. "I remember putting that, and I said pay all debts and testamentary expenses. I remembered that out of a book I'd read."

"You did not use a will form, then?"

"No, there wasn't time for that. I was just going off to the Nursing Home, and besides Mr Croft said will forms were very dangerous. It was better to make a simple will and not try to be too legal."

"M. Croft? He was there?"

"Yes. It was he who asked me if I'd made one. I'd never have thought of it myself. He said if you died in—in—"

"Intestate," I said.

"Yes, that's it. He said if you died intestate, the Crown pinched a lot and that would be a pity."

"Very helpful, the excellent M. Croft!"

"Oh! he was," said Nick warmly. "He got Ellen in and her husband to witness it. Oh! of course! What an idiot I've been!"

We looked at her inquiringly.

"I've been a perfect idiot. Letting you hunt round End House. Charles has got it, of course! My cousin, Charles Vyse."

"Ah! so that is the explanation."

"Mr Croft said a lawyer was the proper person to have charge of it."

"Très correcte, ce bon M. Croft."

"Men are useful sometimes," said Nick. "A lawyer or the Bank—that's what he said. And I said Charles would be best. So we stuck it in an envelope and sent it off to him straight away."

She lay back on her pillows with a sigh.

"I'm sorry I've been so frightfully stupid. But it is all right now. Charles has got it, and if you really want to see it of course he'll show it to you."

"Not without an authorization from you," said Poirot smiling.

"How silly."

"No, Mademoiselle. Merely prudent."

"Well, I think it's silly." She took a piece of paper from a little stack that lay beside her bed. "What shall I say? Let the dog see the rabbit?"

"Comment?"

I laughed at his startled face.

He dictated a form of words, and Nick wrote obediently.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle," said Poirot as he took it.

"I'm sorry to have given you such a lot of trouble. But I really had forgotten. You know how one forgets things almost at once?"

"With order and method in the mind one does not forget."

"I'll have to have a course of some kind," said Nick. "You're giving me quite an inferiority complex."

"That is impossible. *Au revoir, Mademoiselle."* He looked round the room. "Your flowers are lovely."

"Aren't they? The carnations are from Freddie and the roses from George and the lilies from Jim Lazarus. And look here—"

She pulled the wrapping from a large basket of hot-house grapes by her side.

Poirot's face changed. He stepped forward sharply.

"You have not eaten any of them?"

"No. Not yet."

"Do not do so. You must eat nothing, Mademoiselle, that comes in from outside. Nothing. You comprehend?"

"Oh!"

She stared at him, the colour ebbing slowly from her face.

"I see. You think—you think it isn't over yet. You think that they're still trying?" she whispered.

He took her hand.

"Do not think of it. You are safe here. But remember—nothing that comes in from outside."

I was conscious of that white frightened face on the pillow as we left the room.

Poirot looked at his watch.

"Bon. We have just time to catch M. Vyse at his office before he leaves it for lunch."

On arrival we were shown into Charles Vyse's office after the briefest of delays.

The young lawyer rose to greet us. He was as formal and unemotional as ever.

"Good-morning, M. Poirot. What can I do for you?"

Without more ado Poirot presented the letter Nick had written. He took it and read it, then gazed over the top of it at us in a perplexed manner.

"I beg your pardon. I really am at a loss to understand—"

"Has not Mademoiselle Buckley made her meaning clear?"

"In this letter," he tapped it with his finger nail, "she asks me to hand over to you, a will made by her and entrusted to my keeping in February last."

"Yes, Monsieur."

"But, my dear sir, no will has been entrusted to my keeping?"

"Comment?"

"As far as I know my cousin never made a will. I certainly never made one for her."

"She wrote this herself, I understand, on a sheet of notepaper and posted it to you."

The lawyer shook his head.

"In that case all I can say is that I never received it."

"Really, M. Vyse—"

"I never received anything of the kind, M. Poirot."

There was a pause, then Poirot rose to his feet.

"In that case, M. Vyse, there is nothing more to be said. There must be some mistake."

"Certainly there must be some mistake."

He rose also.

"Good-day, M. Vyse."

"Good-day, M. Poirot."

"And that is that," I remarked when we were out in the street once more.

"Précisément."

"Is he lying, do you think?"

"Impossible to tell. He has the good poker face, M. Vyse, besides looking as though he had swallowed one. One thing is clear, he will not budge from the position he has taken up. He never received the will. That is his point."

"Surely Nick will have a written acknowledgment of its receipt."

"Cette petite, she would never bother her head about a thing like that. She dispatched it. It was off her mind. *Voilà.* Besides, on that very day, she went into a Nursing Home to have her appendix out. She had her emotions, in all probability."

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Parbleu, we go and see M. Croft. Let us see what he can remember about this business. It seems to have been very much his doing."

"He didn't profit by it in any way," I said thoughtfully.

"No. No, I cannot see anything in it from his point of view. He is probably merely the busybody—the man who likes to arrange his neighbour's affairs."

Such an attitude was indeed typical of Mr Croft, I felt. He was the kindly knowall who causes so much exasperation in this world of ours.

We found him busy in his shirt sleeves over a steaming pot in the kitchen. A most savoury smell pervaded the little lodge.

He relinquished his cookery with enthusiasm being clearly eager to talk about the murder.

"Half a jiffy," he said. "Walk upstairs. Mother will want to be in on this. She'd never forgive us for talking down here. Cooee—Milly. Two friends coming up."

Mrs Croft greeted us warmly and was eager for news of Nick. I liked her much better than her husband.

"That poor dear girl," she said. "In a Nursing Home, you say? Had a complete breakdown, I shouldn't wonder. A dreadful business, Mr Poirot—perfectly dreadful. An innocent young girl like that shot dead. It doesn't bear thinking about—it doesn't indeed. And no lawless wild part of the world either. Right here in the heart of the old country. Kept me awake all night, it did."

"It's made me nervous about going out and leaving you, old lady," said her husband, who had put on his coat and joined us. "I don't like to think of your having been left all alone here yesterday evening. It gives me the shivers."

"You're not going to leave me again, I can tell you," said Mrs Croft. "Not after dark, anyway. And I'm thinking I'd like to leave this part of the world as soon as possible. I shall never feel the same about it. I shouldn't think poor Nicky Buckley could ever bear to sleep in that house again."

It was a little difficult to reach the object of our visit. Both Mr and Mrs Croft talked so much and were so anxious to know all about everything. Were the poor dead girl's relations coming down? When was the funeral? Was there to be an inquest? What did the police think? Had they any clue yet? Was it true that a man had been arrested in Plymouth?"

Then, having answered all these questions, they were insistent on offering us lunch. Only Poirot's mendacious statement that we were obliged to hurry back to lunch with the Chief Constable saved us.

At last a momentary pause occurred and Poirot got in the question he had been waiting to ask.

"Why, of course," said Mr Croft. He pulled the blind cord up and down twice, frowning at it abstractedly. "I remember all about it. Must have been when we first came here. I remember. Appendicitis—that's what the doctors said—"

"And probably not appendicitis at all," interrupted Mrs Croft. "These doctors—they always like cutting you up if they can. It wasn't the kind you have to operate on anyhow. She'd had indigestion and one thing and another and they'd X-rayed her and they said out it had better come. And there she was, poor little soul just going off to one of those nasty Homes."

"I just asked her," said Mr Croft, "if she'd made a will. More as a joke than anything else."

"Yes?"

"And she wrote it out then and there. Talked about getting a will form at the post office—but I advised her not to. Lot of trouble they cause sometimes, so a man told me. Anyway, her cousin is a lawyer. He could draw her out a proper one afterwards if everything was all right—as of course I knew it would be. This was just a precautionary matter."

"Who witnessed it?"

"Oh! Ellen, the maid, and her husband."

"And afterwards? What was done with it?"

"Oh! we posted it to Vyse. The lawyer, you know."

"You know that it was posted?"

"My dear M. Poirot, I posted it myself. Right in this box here by the gate."

"So if M. Vyse says he never got it—"

Croft stared.

"Do you mean that it got lost in the post? Oh! but surely that's impossible."

"Anyway, you are certain that you posted it."

"Certain sure," said Mr Croft heartily. "I'll take my oath on that any day."

"Ah! well," said Poirot. "Fortunately it does not matter. Mademoiselle is not likely to die just yet awhile."

We made our escape.

"Et voilà!" said Poirot when we were out of earshot and walking down to the Hotel. "Who is lying? M. Croft? Or M. Charles Vyse? I must confess I see no reason why M. Croft should be lying. To suppress the will would be of no advantage to him—especially when he had been instrumental in getting it made. No, his statement seems clear enough and tallies exactly with what was told us by Mademoiselle Nick. But all the same—"

"Yes?"

"All the same, I am glad that M. Croft was doing the cooking when we arrived. He left an excellent impression of a greasy thumb and first finger on a corner of the newspaper that covered the kitchen table. I managed to tear it off unseen by him. We will send it to our good friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. There is just a chance that he might know something about it."

"Yes?"

"You know, Hastings, I cannot help feeling that our genial M. Croft is a little too good to be genuine."

"And now," he added. *"Le déjeuner.* I faint with hunger."

CHAPTER XV

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF FREDERICA

POIROT'S inventions about the Chief Constable were proved not to have been so mendacious after all. Colonel Weston called upon us soon after lunch.

He was a tall man of military carriage with considerable good looks. He had a suitable reverence for Poirot's achievements with which he seemed to be well acquainted.

"Marvellous piece of luck for us having you down here, M. Poirot," he said again and again.

His one fear was that he should be compelled to call in the assistance of Scotland Yard. He was anxious to solve the mystery and catch the criminal without their aid. Hence his delight at Poirot's presence in the neighbourhood.

Poirot, so far as I could judge, took him completely into his confidence.

"Deuced odd business," said the Colonel. "Never heard of anything like it. Well, the girl ought to be safe enough in a Nursing Home. Still, you can't keep her there for ever!"

"That, M. le Colonel, is just the difficulty. There is only one way of dealing with it."

"And that is?"

"We must lay our hands on the person responsible."

"If what you suspect is true, that isn't going to be so easy."

"Ah! je le sais bien."

"Evidence! Getting evidence is going to be the devil."

He frowned abstractedly.

"Always difficult, these cases, where there's no routine work. If we could get hold of the pistol—"

"In all probability it is at the bottom of the sea. That is, if the murderer had any sense."

"Ah!" said Colonel Weston. "But often they haven't. You'd be surprised at the fool things people do. I'm not talking of murders—we don't have many murders down in these parts, I'm glad to say—but in ordinary police court cases. The sheer damn foolishness of these people would surprise you."

"They are of a different mentality, though."

"Yes—perhaps. If Vyse is the chap, well, we'll have our work cut out. He's a cautious man and a sound lawyer. He'll not give himself away. The woman—well, there would be more hope there. Ten to one she'll try again. Women have no patience."

He rose.

"Inquest tomorrow morning. Coroner will work in with us and give away as little as possible. We want to keep things dark at present."

He was turning towards the door when he suddenly came back.

"Upon my soul, I'd forgotten the very thing that will interest you most, and that I want your opinion about."

Sitting down again, he drew from his pocket a torn scrap of paper with writing on it and handed it to Poirot.

"My police found this when they were searching the grounds. Not far from where you were all watching the fireworks. It's the only suggestive thing they did find."

Poirot smoothed it out. The writing was large and straggling.

"*—must have money at once. If not you—*

—what will happen. I'm warning you"

Poirot frowned. He read and re-read it.

"That is interesting," he said. "I may keep it?"

"Certainly. There are no fingerprints on it. I'll be glad if you can make anything of it."

Colonel Weston got to his feet again.

"I really must be off. Inquest tomorrow, as I said. By the way, you are not being called as witness—only Captain Hastings. Don't want the newspaper people to get wise to your being on the job."

"I comprehend. What of the relations of the poor young lady?"

"The father and mother are coming from Yorkshire today. They'll arrive about half past five. Poor souls. I'm heartily sorry for them. They are taking the body back with them the following day."

He shook his head.

"Unpleasant business. I'm not enjoying this, M. Poirot."

"Who could, M. le Colonel? It is, as you say, an unpleasant business."

When he had gone, Poirot examined the scrap of paper once more.

"An important clue?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How can one tell? There is a hint of blackmail about it? Some one of our party that night was being pressed for money in a very unpleasant way. Of course, it is possible that it was one of the strangers."

He looked at the writing through a little magnifying glass.

"Does this writing look at all familiar to you, Hastings?"

"It reminds me a little of something— Ah! I have it—that note of Mrs Rice's."

"Yes," said Poirot slowly. "There are resemblances. Decidedly there are resemblances. It is curious. Yet I do not think that this is the writing of Madame Rice. Come in," he said as a knock came at the door.

It was Commander Challenger.

"Just looked in," he explained. "Wanted to know if you were any further forward."

"Parbleu," said Poirot. "At this moment I am feeling that I am considerably further back. I seem to progress *en reculant."*

"That's bad. But I don't really believe it, M. Poirot. I've been hearing all about you and what a wonderful chap you are. Never had a failure, they say."

"That is not true," said Poirot. "I had a bad failure in Belgium in 1893. You recollect, Hastings? I recounted it to you. The affair of the box of chocolates."

"I remember," I said.

And I smiled, for at the time that Poirot told me that tale, he had instructed me to say "chocolate box" to him if ever I should fancy he was growing conceited! He was then bitterly offended when I used the magical words only a minute and a quarter later.

"Oh! well," said Challenger. "That is such a long time ago it hardly counts. You are going to get to the bottom of this, aren't you?"

"That I swear. On the word of Hercule Poirot. I am the dog who stays on the scent and does not leave it."

"Good. Got any ideas?"

"I have suspicions of two people."

"I suppose I mustn't ask who they are?"

"I should not tell you! You see, I might possibly be in error."

"My alibi is satisfactory, I trust," said Challenger with a faint twinkle.

Poirot smiled indulgently at the bronzed face in front of him. "You left Devonport at a few minutes past 8.30. You arrived here at five minutes past ten—twenty minutes after the crime had been committed. But the distance from Devonport is only just over thirty miles and you have often done it in an hour since the road is good. So, you see, your alibi is not good at all!"

"Well, I'm—"

"You comprehend, I inquire into everything. Your alibi, as I say, is not good. But there are other things beside alibis. You would like, I think, to marry Mademoiselle Nick?"

The sailor's face flushed.

"I've always wanted to marry her," he said huskily.

"Precisely. *Eh bien*—Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to another man. A reason, perhaps, for killing the other man. But that is unnecessary—he dies the death of a hero."

"So it is true—that Nick was engaged to Michael Seton? There's a rumour to that effect all over the town this morning."

"Yes—it is interesting how soon news spreads. You never suspected it before?"

"I knew Nick was engaged to someone—she told me so two days ago. But she didn't give me a clue as to who it was."

"It was Michael Seton. *Entre nous,* he has left her, I fancy, a very pretty fortune. Ah! assuredly, it is not a moment for killing Mademoiselle Nick—from your point of view. She weeps for her lover now, but the heart consoles itself. She is young. And I think, Monsieur, that she is very fond of you. . . ."

Challenger was silent for a moment or two.

"If it should be . . ." he murmured.

There was a tap on the door.

It was Frederica Rice.

"I've been looking for you," she said to Challenger. "They told me you were here. I wanted to know if you'd got my wrist watch back yet."

"Oh! yes, I called for it this morning."

He took it from his pocket and handed it to her. It was a watch of rather an unusual shape—round, like a globe, set on a strap of plain black moiré. I remembered that I had seen one much the same shape on Nick Buckley's wrist.

"I hope it will keep better time now."

"It's rather a bore. Something is always going wrong with it."

"It is for beauty, Madame, and not for utility," said Poirot.

"Can't one have both?" She looked from one to the other of us. "Am I interrupting a conference?"

"No, indeed, Madame. We were talking the gossip—not the crime. We were saying how quickly news spreads—how that everyone now knows that Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to that brave airman who perished."

"So Nick was engaged to Michael Seton!" exclaimed Frederica.

"It surprises you, Madame?"

"It does a little. I don't know why. Certainly I did think he was very taken with her last Autumn. They went about a lot together. And then, after Christmas, they both seemed to cool off. As far as I know, they hardly met."

"The secret, they kept it very well."

"That was because of old Sir Matthew, I suppose. He was really a little off his head, I think."

"You had no suspicion, Madame? And yet Mademoiselle Nick was such an intimate friend."

"Nick's a close little devil when she likes," murmured Frederica. "But I understand now why she's been so nervy lately. Oh! and I ought to have guessed from something she said only the other day."

"Your little friend is very attractive, Madame."

"Old Jim Lazarus used to think so at one time," said Challenger with his loud rather tactless laugh.

"Oh! Jim—" she shrugged her shoulders, but I thought she was annoyed.

She turned to Poirot.

"Tell me, M. Poirot, did you—?"

She stopped. Her tall figure swayed and her face turned whiter still. Her eyes were fixed on the centre of the table.

"You are not well, Madame."

I pushed forward a chair, helped her to sink into it. She shook her head, murmured: "I'm all right," and leaned forward, her face between her hands. We watched her awkwardly.

She sat up in a minute.

"How absurd! George darling, don't look so worried. Let's talk about murders. Something exciting. I want to know if M. Poirot is on the track."

"It is early to say, Madame," said Poirot noncommittally.

"But you have ideas—yes?"

"Perhaps. But I need a great deal more evidence."

"Oh!" she sounded uncertain.

Suddenly she rose.

"I've got a head. I think I'll go and lie down. Perhaps tomorrow they'll let me see Nick."

She left the room abruptly. Challenger frowned.

"You never know what that woman's up to. Nick may have been fond of her, but I don't believe she was fond of Nick. But there you can't tell with women. It's darling—darling—darling—all the time—and 'damn you' would probably express it much better. Are you going out M. Poirot?" For Poirot had risen and was carefully brushing a speck off his hat.

"Yes, I am going into the town."

"I've got nothing to do. May I come with you."

"Assuredly. It will be a pleasure."

We left the room. Poirot, with an apology went back.

"My stick," he explained as he rejoined us.

Challenger winced slightly. And indeed the stick, with its embossed gold band, was somewhat ornate.

Poirot's first visit was to a florist.

"I must send some flowers to Mademoiselle Nick," he explained.

He proved difficult to suit.

In the end he chose an ornate gold basket to be filled with orange carnations. The whole to be tied up with a large blue bow.

The shopwoman gave him a card and he wrote on it with a flourish "With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot."

"I sent her some flowers this morning," said Challenger. "I might send her some fruit."

"Inutile!" said Poirot.

"What?"

"I said it was useless. The eatables—it is not permitted."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. I have made the rule. It has already been impressed on Mademoiselle Nick. She understands."

"Good Lord!" said Challenger.

He looked thoroughly startled. He stared at Poirot curiously.

"So that's it, is it?" he said. "You're still—afraid."

CHAPTER XVI

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WHITFIELD

THE INQUEST was a dry proceeding—mere bare bones. There was evidence of identification, then I gave evidence of the finding of the body. Medical evidence followed.

The inquest was adjourned for a week.

The St. Loo murder had jumped into prominence in the daily press. It had, in fact, succeeded "SETON STILL MISSING. UNKNOWN FATE OF MISSING AIRMAN."

Now that Seton was dead and due tribute had been paid to his memory, a new sensation was due. The St. Loo Mystery was a godsend to papers at their wits' end for news in the month of August.

After the inquest, having successfully dodged reporters, I met Poirot and we had an interview with the Rev. Giles Buckley and his wife.

Maggie's father and mother were a charming pair, completely unworldly and unsophisticated.

Mrs Buckley was a woman of character, tall and fair and showing very plainly her northern ancestry. Her husband was a small man, grey-headed, with a diffident appealing manner.

Poor souls, they were completely dazed by the misfortune that had overtaken them and robbed them of a well-loved daughter. "Our Maggie" as they called her.

"I can scarcely realize it even now," said Mr Buckley. "Such a dear child, M. Poirot. So quiet and unselfish—always thinking of others. Who could wish to harm her?"

"I could hardly understand the telegram," said Mrs Buckley. "Why it was only the morning before that we had seen her off."

"In the midst of life we are in death," murmured her husband.

"Colonel Weston has been very kind," said Mrs Buckley. "He assures us that everything is being done to find the man who did this thing. He must be a madman. No other explanation is possible."

"Madame, I cannot tell you how I sympathize with you in your loss—and how I admire your bravery!"

"Breaking down would not bring Maggie back to us," said Mrs Buckley sadly.

"My wife is wonderful," said the clergyman. "Her faith and courage are greater than mine. It is all so—so bewildering, M. Poirot."

"I know—I know, Monsieur."

"You are a great detective, M. Poirot?" said Mrs Buckley.

"It has been said, Madame."

"Oh! I know. Even in our remote country village we have heard of you. You are going to find out the truth, M. Poirot?"

"I shall not rest until I do, Madame."

"It will be revealed to you, M. Poirot," quavered the clergyman. "Evil cannot go unpunished."

"Evil never goes unpunished, Monsieur. But the punishment is sometimes secret."

"What do you mean by that, M. Poirot?"

Poirot only shook his head.

"Poor little Nick," said Mrs Buckley. "I am really sorriest of all for her. I had a most pathetic letter. She says she feels she asked Maggie down here to her death."

"That is morbid," said Mr Buckley.

"Yes, but I know how she feels. I wish they would let me see her. It seems so extraordinary not to let her own family visit her."

"Doctors and nurses are very strict," said Poirot evasively. "They make the rules—so—and nothing will change them. And doubtless they fear for her the emotion—the natural emotion—she would experience on seeing you."

"Perhaps," said Mrs Buckley doubtfully. "But I don't hold with Nursing Homes. Nick would do much better if they let her come back with me—right away from this place."

"It is possible—but I fear they will not agree. It is long since you have seen Mademoiselle Buckley?"

"I haven't seen her since last Autumn. She was at Scarborough. Maggie went over and spent the day with her and then she came back and spent a night with us. She's a pretty creature—though I can't say I like her friends. And the life she leads—well, it's hardly her fault, poor child. She's had no upbringing of any kind."

"It is a strange house—End House," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"I don't like it," said Mrs Buckley. "I never have. There's something all wrong about that house. I disliked old Sir Nicholas intensely. He made me shiver."

"Not a good man, I'm afraid," said her husband. "But he had a curious charm."

"*I* never felt it," said Mrs Buckley. "There's an evil feeling about that house. I wish we'd never let our Maggie go there."

"Ah! wishing," said Mr Buckley and shook his head.

"Well," said Poirot. "I must not intrude upon you any longer. I only wished to proffer to you my deep sympathy."

"You have been very kind, M. Poirot. And we are indeed grateful for all you are doing."

"You return to Yorkshire—when?"

"Tomorrow. A sad journey. Good-bye, M. Poirot, and thank you again."

"Very simple delightful people," I said after we had left.

Poirot nodded.

"It makes the heart ache, does it not, *mon ami?* A tragedy so useless—so purposeless. *Cette jeune fille*—Ah! but I reproach myself bitterly. I, Hercule Poirot, was on the spot and I did not prevent the crime!"

"Nobody could have prevented it."

"You speak without reflection, Hastings. No ordinary person could have prevented it—but of what good is it to be Hercule Poirot with grey cells of a finer quality than other people's, if you do not manage to do what ordinary people cannot?"

"Well, of course," I said. "If you are going to put it like that—"

"Yes, indeed. I am abashed, downhearted—completely abased."

I reflected that Poirot's abasement was strangely like other people's conceit, but I prudently forebore making any remark.

"And now," he said. *"En avant.* To London."

"London?"

"Mais oui. We shall catch the two o'clock train very comfortably. All is peaceful here. Mademoiselle is safe in the Nursing Home. No one can harm her. The watch-dogs therefore can take leave of absence. There are one or two little pieces of information that I require."

Our first proceeding on arriving in London was to call upon the late Captain Seton's solicitors, Messrs Whitfield, Pargiter & Whitfield.

Poirot had arranged for an appointment beforehand, and although it was past six o'clock, we were soon closeted with Mr Whitfield, the head of the firm.

He was a very urbane and impressive person. He had in front of him a letter from the Chief Constable and another from some high official at Scotland Yard.

"This is all very irregular and unusual, M.—ah—Poirot," he said, as he polished his eyeglasses.

"Quite so, M. Whitfield. But then murder is also irregular—and, I am glad to say, sufficiently unusual."

"True. True. But rather far fetched—to make a connexion between this murder and my late client's bequest—eh?"

"I think not."

"Ah! you think not. Well—under the circumstances—and I must admit that Sir Henry puts it very strongly in his letter—I shall be—er—happy to do anything that is in my power."

"You acted as legal adviser to the late Captain Seton?"

"To all the Seton family, my dear sir. We have done so—our firm have done so, I mean—for the last hundred years."

"Parfaitement. The late Sir Matthew Seton made a will?"

"We made it for him."

"And he left his fortune—how?"

"There were several bequests—one to the Natural History Museum—but the bulk of his large—his, I may say, very large fortune—he left to Captain Michael Seton absolutely. He had no other near relations."

"A very large fortune you say?"

"The late Sir Matthew was the second richest man in England," replied Mr Whitfield composedly.

"He had somewhat peculiar views, had he not?"

Mr Whitfield looked at him severely.

"A millionaire, M. Poirot, is allowed to be eccentric. It is almost expected of him."

Poirot received this correction meekly and asked another question.

"His death was unexpected, I understand?"

"Most unexpected. Sir Matthew enjoyed remarkably good health. He had an internal growth, however, which no one had suspected. It reached a vital tissue and an immediate operation was necessary. The operation was, as always on these occasions, completely successful. But Sir Matthew died."

"And his fortune passed to Captain Seton."

"That is so."

"Captain Seton had, I understand, made a will before leaving England?"

"If you can call it a will—yes," said Mr Whitfield with strong distaste.

"It is legal?"

"It is perfectly legal. The intention of the testator is plain and it is properly witnessed. Oh! yes, it is legal."

"But you do not approve of it?"

"My dear sir, what are we for?"

I had often wondered. Having once had occasion to make a perfectly simple will myself, I had been appalled at the length and verbiage that resulted from my solicitor's office.

"The truth of the matter was," continued Mr Whitfield, "that at the time Captain Seton had little or nothing to leave. He was dependent on the allowance he received from his uncle. He felt, I suppose, that Anything would Do."

And had thought correctly, I whispered to myself.

"And the terms of this will?" asked Poirot.

"He leaves everything of which he dies possessed to his affianced wife, Miss Magdala Buckley absolutely. He names me as his executor."

"Then Miss Buckley inherits?"

"Certainly Miss Buckley inherits."

"And if Miss Buckley had happened to die last Monday?"

"Captain Seton having predeceased her, the money would go to whoever she had named in her will as residuary legatee—or failing a will, to her next of kin.

"I may say," added Mr Whitfield with an air of enjoyment "that the death duties would have been enormous. Enormous! Three deaths, remember, in rapid succession." He shook his head. "Enormous!"

"But there would have been something left?" murmured Poirot meekly.

"My dear sir, as I told you, Sir Matthew was the second richest man in England."

Poirot rose.

"Thank you, Mr Whitfield, very much for the information that you have given me."

"Not at all. Not at all. I may say that I shall be in communication with Miss Buckley—indeed I believe the letter has already gone. I shall be happy to be of any service I can to her."

"She is a young lady," said Poirot, "who could do with some sound legal advice."

"There will be fortune hunters, I am afraid," said Mr Whitfield shaking his head.

"It seems indicated," agreed Poirot. "Good-day, Monsieur."

"Good-bye, M. Poirot. Glad to have been of service to you. Your name is—ah!—familiar to me."

He said this kindly—with an air of one making a valuable admission.

"It is all exactly as you thought, Poirot," I said when we were outside.

"Mon ami, it was bound to be. It could not be any other way. We will go now to the Cheshire Cheese where Japp meets us for an early dinner."

We found Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard awaiting us at the chosen rendezvous. He greeted Poirot with every sign of warmth.

"Years since I've seen you, Moosior Poirot? Thought you were growing vegetable marrows in the country."

"I tried, Japp, I tried. But even when you grow vegetable marrows you cannot get away from murder."

He sighed. I knew of what he was thinking—that strange affair at Fernley Park. How I regretted that I had been far away at that time.

"And Captain Hastings too," said Japp. "How are you, sir?"

"Very fit, thanks," I said.

"And now there are more murders?" continued Japp facetiously.

"As you say—more murders."

"Well, you mustn't be depressed, old cock," said Japp. "Even if you can't see your way clear—well—you can't go about at your time of life and expect to have the success you used to do. We all of us get stale as the years go by. Got to give the young 'uns a chance, you know."

"And yet the old dog is the one who knows the tricks," murmured Poirot. "He is cunning. He does not leave the scent."

"Oh! well—we're talking about human beings, not dogs."

"Is there so much difference?"

"Well, it depends how you look at things. But you're a caution, isn't he, Captain Hastings? Always was. Looks much the same—hair a bit thinner on top but the face fungus fuller than ever."

"Eh?" said Poirot. "What is that?"

"He's congratulating you on your moustaches," I said soothingly.

"They are luxuriant, yes," said Poirot complacently caressing them.

Japp went off into a roar of laughter.

"Well," he said, after a minute or two. "I've done your bit of business. Those fingerprints you sent me—"

"Yes?" said Poirot eagerly.

"Nothing doing. Whoever the gentleman may be—he hasn't passed through our hands. On the other hand, I wired to Melbourne and nobody of that description or name is known there."

"Ah!"

"So there may be something fishy after all. But he's not one of the lads."

"As to the other business," went on Japp.

"Yes?"

"Lazarus and Son have a good reputation. Quite straight and honourable in their dealings. Sharp, of course—but that's another matter. You've got to be sharp in business. But they're all right. They're in a bad way, though—financially, I mean."

"Oh!—is that so?"

"Yes—the slump in pictures has hit them badly. And antique furniture too. All this modern continental stuff coming into fashion. They built new premises last year and—well—as I say, they're not far from Queer Street."

"I am much obliged to you."

"Not at all. That sort of thing isn't my line, as you know. But I made a point of finding out as you wanted to know. We can always get information."

"My good Japp, what should I do without you?"

"Oh! that's all right. Always glad to oblige an old friend. I let you in on some pretty good cases in the old days, didn't I?"

This, I realized, was Japp's way of acknowledging indebtedness to Poirot who had solved many a case which had baffled the Inspector.

"They were the good days—yes."

"I wouldn't mind having a chat with you now and again even in these days. Your methods may be old-fashioned but you've got your head screwed on the right way, M. Poirot."

"What about my other question. The Dr MacAllister?"

"Oh! him. He's a woman's doctor. I don't mean a gynecologist. I mean one of these nerve doctors—tell you to sleep in purple walls and an orange ceiling—talk to you about your libido whatever that is—tells you to let it rip. He's a bit of a quack if you ask me—but he gets the women all right. They flock to him. Goes abroad a good deal—does some kind of medical work in Paris, I believe."

"Why Dr MacAllister?" I asked bewildered. I had never heard of the name. "Where does he come in?"

"Dr MacAllister is the uncle of Commander Challenger," explained Poirot. "You remember he referred to an uncle who was a doctor?"

"How thorough you are," I said. "Did you think he had operated on Sir Matthew?"

"He's not a surgeon," said Japp.

"Mon ami," said Poirot. "I like to inquire into everything. Hercule Poirot is a good dog. The dog follows the scent, and if, regrettably, there is no scent to follow, he noses around—seeking always something that is not very nice. So also, does Hercule Poirot. And often—oh! so often—does he find it!"

"It's not a nice profession, ours," said Japp. "Stilton, did you say? I don't mind if I do. No, it's not a nice profession. And yours is worse than mine—not official, you see, and therefore a lot more worming yourself into places in underhand ways."

"I do not disguise myself, Japp. Never have I disguised myself."

"You couldn't," said Japp. "You're unique. Once seen, never forgotten."

Poirot looked at him rather doubtfully.

"Only my fun," said Japp. "Don't mind me. Glass of port? Well, if you say so. . . ."

The evening became thoroughly harmonious. We were soon in the middle of reminiscences. This case, that case, and the other. I must say that I, too, enjoyed talking over the past. Those had been good days. How old and experienced I felt now!

Poor old Poirot. He was perplexed by this case—I could see that. His powers were not what they were. I had the feeling that he was going to fail—that the murderer of Maggie Buckley would never be brought to book.

"Courage, my friend," said Poirot slapping me on the shoulder. "All is not lost. Do not pull the long face, I beg of you."

"That's all right. I'm all right."

"And so am I. And so is Japp."

"We're all all right," declared Japp hilariously.

And on this pleasant note we parted.

The following morning we journeyed back to St. Loo. On arrival at the hotel Poirot rang up the Nursing Home and asked to speak to Nick.

Suddenly I saw his face change—he almost dropped the instrument.

"Comment? What is that? Say it again, I beg."

He waited for a minute or two listening. Then he said.

"Yes, yes, I will come at once."

He turned a pale face to me.

"Why did I go away, Hastings? *Mon Dieu!* Why did I go away?"

"What has happened?"

"Mademoiselle Nick is dangerously ill. Cocaine poisoning. They have got at her after all. *Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu,* why did I go away?"

CHAPTER XVII

A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

ALL THE way to the Nursing Home Poirot murmured and muttered to himself. He was full of self-reproach.

"I should have known," he groaned. "I should have known! And yet, what could I do? I took every precaution. It is impossible—impossible. No one could get to her! Who has disobeyed my orders?"

At the Nursing Home we were shown into a little room downstairs and after a few minutes Dr Graham came to us. He looked exhausted and white.

"She'll do," he said. "It's going to be all right. The trouble was knowing how much she's taken of the damned stuff."

"What was it?"

"Cocaine."

"She will live?"

"Yes, yes, she'll live."

"But how did it happen? How did they get at her? Who has been allowed in?" Poirot fairly danced with impotent excitement.

"Nobody has been allowed in."

"Impossible."

"It's true."

"But then—"

"It was a box of chocolates."

"Ah, *sacré*. And I told her to eat nothing—nothing—that came from outside."

"I don't know about that. It's hard work keeping a girl from a box of chocolates. She only ate one, thank goodness."

"Was there cocaine in all the chocolates?"

"No. The girl ate one. There were two others in the top layer. The rest were all right."

"How was it done?"

"Quite clumsily. Chocolate cut in half—the cocaine mixed with the filling and the chocolate stuck together again. Amateurishly. What you might call a home made job."

Poirot groaned.

"Ah! if I knew—if I knew. Can I see Mademoiselle?"

"If you come back in an hour I think you can see her," said the doctor. "Pull yourself together, man. She isn't going to die."

For another hour we walked the streets of St. Loo. I did my best to distract Poirot's mind—pointing out to him that all was well, that, after all, no mischief had been done.

But he only shook his head, and repeated at intervals.

"I am afraid, Hastings, I am afraid. . . ."

And the strange way he said it made me, too, feel afraid.

Once he caught me by the arm.

"Listen, my friend. I am all wrong. I have been all wrong from the beginning."

"You mean it isn't the money. . . ."

"No, no, I am right about that. Oh! yes. But those two—it is too simple—too easy, that. There is another twist still. Yes, there is something!"

And then in an outburst of indignation.

"*Ah! cette petite!* Did I not forbid her? Did I not say—"Do not touch anything from outside?" And she disobeys me—me, Hercule Poirot. Are not four escapes from death enough for her? Must she take a fifth chance? *Ah, c'est inoui!*"

At last we made our way back. After a brief wait we were conducted upstairs.

Nick was sitting up in bed. The pupils of her eyes were widely dilated. She looked feverish and her hands kept twitching violently.

"At it again," she murmured.

Poirot experienced real emotion at the sight of her. He cleared his throat and took her hand in his.

"Ah! Mademoiselle—Mademoiselle."

"I shouldn't care," she said defiantly, "if they had got me this time. I'm sick of it all—sick of it!"

"Pauvre petite!"

"Something in me doesn't like to give them best!"

"That is the spirit—*le sport*—you must be the good sport, Mademoiselle."

"Your old Nursing Home hasn't been so safe after all," said Nick.

"If you had obeyed orders, Mademoiselle—"

She looked faintly astonished.

"But I have."

"Did I not impress upon you that you were to eat nothing that came from outside?"

"No more I did."

"But these chocolates—"

"Well, they were all right. You sent them."

"What is that you say, Mademoiselle?"

"You sent them!"

"Me? Never. Never anything of the kind."

"But you did. Your card was in the box."

"What?"

Nick made a spasmodic gesture towards the table by the bed. The nurse came forward.

"You want the card that was in the box?"

"Yes, please, nurse."

There was a moment's pause. The nurse returned to the room with it in her hand.

"Here it is."

I gasped. So did Poirot. For on the card, in flourishing handwriting, was written the same words that I had seen Poirot inscribe on the card that accompanied the basket of flowers.

"With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot."

"Sacré tonnerre!"

"You see," said Nick accusingly.

"I did not write this!" cried Poirot.

"What?"

"And yet," murmured Poirot, "and yet it is my handwriting."

"I know. It's exactly the same as the card that came with the orange carnations. I never doubted that the chocolates came from you."

Poirot shook his head.

"How should you doubt? Oh! the devil! The clever cruel devil! To think of that! Ah! but he has genius, this man, genius! *'With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot.'* So simple. Yes, but one had to think of it. And I—I did not think. I omitted to foresee this move."

Nick moved restlessly.

"Do not agitate yourself, Mademoiselle. You are blameless—blameless. It is I that am to blame, miserable imbecile that I am! I should have foreseen this move. Yes, I should have foreseen it."

His chin dropped on his breast. He looked the picture of misery.

"I really think—" said the nurse.

She had been hovering nearby, a disapproving expression on her face.

"Eh? Yes, yes, I will go. Courage, Mademoiselle. This is the last mistake I will make. I am ashamed, desolated—I have been tricked, outwitted—as though I were a little schoolboy. But it shall not happen again. No. I promise you. Come, Hastings."

Poirot's first proceeding was to interview the matron. She was, naturally, terribly upset over the whole business.

"It seems incredible to me, M. Poirot, absolutely incredible. That a thing like that should happen in my Nursing Home."

Poirot was sympathetic and tactful. Having soothed her sufficiently, he began to inquire into the circumstance of the arrival of the fatal packet. Here, the matron declared, he would do best to interview the orderly who had been on duty at the time of its arrival.

The man in question, whose name was Hodd, was a stupid but honest looking young fellow of about twenty-two. He looked nervous and frightened. Poirot put him at his ease, however.

"No blame can be attached to you," he said kindly. "But I want you to tell me exactly when and how this parcel arrived."

The orderly looked puzzled.

"It's difficult to say, sir," he said slowly. "Lots of people come and inquire and leave things for the different patients."

"The nurse says this came last night," I said. "About six o'clock."

The lad's face brightened.

"I do remember, now, sir. A gentleman brought it."

"A thin-faced gentleman—fair-haired?"

"He was fair-haired—but I don't know about thin-faced."

"Would Charles Vyse bring it himself?" I murmured to Poirot.

I had forgotten that the lad would know a local name.

"It wasn't Mr Vyse," he said. "I know him. It was a bigger gentleman—nandsome looking—came in a big car."

"Lazarus," I exclaimed.

Poirot shot me a warning glance and I regretted my precipitance.

"He came in a large car and he left this parcel. It was addressed to Miss Buckley?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did you do with it?"

"I didn't touch it, sir. Nurse took it up."

"Quite so, but you touched it when you took it from the gentleman, *n'est ce pas?"*

"Oh! that, yes, of course, sir. I took it from him and put it on the table."

"Which table? Show me if you please."

The orderly led us into the hall. The front door was open. Close to it, in the hall, was a long marble-topped table on which lay letters and parcels.

"Everything that comes is put on here, sir. Then the nurses take things up to the patients."

"Do you remember what time this parcel was left?"

"Must have been about five thirty, or a little after. I know the post had just been, and that's usually at about half past five. It was a pretty busy afternoon, a lot of people leaving flowers and coming to see patients."

"Thank you. Now, I think, we will see the nurse who took up the parcel."

This proved to be one of the probationers, a fluffy little person all agog with excitement. She remembered taking the parcel up at six o'clock when she came on duty.

"Six o'clock," murmured Poirot. "Then it must have been twenty minutes or so that the parcel was lying on the table downstairs."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, Mademoiselle. Continue. You took the parcel to Miss Buckley?"

"Yes, there were several things for her. There was this box and some flowers also—sweet peas—from a Mr and Mrs Croft, I think. I took them up at the same time. And there was a parcel that had come by post—and curiously enough that was a box of Fuller's chocolates also."

"Comment? A second box?"

"Yes, rather a coincidence. Miss Buckley opened them both. She said: 'Oh! what a shame. I'm not allowed to eat them.' Then she opened the lids to look inside and see if they were both just the same, and your card was in one and she said 'Take the other impure box away, nurse. I might get them mixed up.' Oh! dear, whoever would have thought of such a thing? Seems like an Edgar Wallace, doesn't it?"

Poirot cut short this flood of speech.

"Two boxes, you say? From whom was the other box?"

"There was no name inside."

"And which was the one that came—that had the appearance of coming—from me? The one by post or the other?"

"I declare now—I can't remember. Shall I go up and ask Miss Buckley?"

"If you would be so amiable."

She ran up the stairs.

"Two boxes," murmured Poirot. "There is confusion for you."

The nurse returned breathless.

"Miss Buckley isn't sure. She unwrapped them both before she looked inside. But she thinks it wasn't the box that came by post."

"Eh?" said Poirot a little confused.

"The box from you was the one that didn't come by post. At least she thinks so, but she isn't quite sure."

"Diable!" said Poirot as we walked away. "Is no one ever quite sure? In

detective books—yes. But life—real life—is always full of muddle. Am I sure, myself, about anything at all? No, no—a thousand times, no."

"Lazarus," I said.

"Yes, that is a surprise, is it not?"

"Shall you say anything to him about it?"

"Assuredly. I shall be interested to see how he takes it. By the way, we might as well exaggerate the serious condition of Mademoiselle. It will do no harm to let it be assumed that she is at death's door. You comprehend? The solemn face— Yes, admirable. You resemble closely an undertaker. *C'est tout à fait bien."*

We were lucky in finding Lazarus. He was bending over the bonnet of his car outside the hotel.

Poirot went straight up to him.

"Yesterday evening, Monsieur Lazarus, you left a box of chocolates for Mademoiselle," he began without preamble.

Lazarus looked rather surprised.

"Yes?"

"That was very amiable of you."

"As a matter of fact they were from Freddie, from Mrs Rice. She asked me to get them."

"Oh! I see."

"I took them round there in the car."

"I comprehend."

He was silent for a minute or two and then said:

"Madame Rice, where is she?"

"I think she's in the lounge."

We found Frederica having tea. She looked up at us with an anxious face.

"What is this I hear about Nick being taken ill?"

"It is a most mysterious affair, Madame. Tell me, did you send her a box of chocolates yesterday?"

"Yes. At least she asked me to get them for her."

"She asked you to get them for her?"

"Yes."

"But she was not allowed to see anyone. How did you see her?"

"I didn't. She telephoned."

"Ah! And she said—what?"

"Would I get her a two pound box of Fuller's chocolates."

"How did her voice sound—week?"

"No—not at all. Quite strong. But different somehow. I didn't realize it was she speaking at first."

"Until she told you who she was?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure, Madame, that it was your friend?"

Frederica looked startled.

"I—I—why, of course it was. Who else could it have been?"

"That is an interesting question, Madame."

"You don't mean—"

"Could you swear, Madame, that it was your friend's voice—apart from what she said?"

"No," said Frederica slowly. "I couldn't. Her voice was certainly different. I thought it was the phone—or perhaps being ill . . ."

"If she had not told you who she was, you would not have recognized it?"

"No, no I don't think I should. Who was it, M. Poirot? Who was it?"

"That is what I mean to know, Madame."

The graveness of his face seemed to awaken her suspicions.

"Is Nick—has anything happened?" She asked breathlessly.

Poirot nodded.

"She is ill—dangerously ill. Those chocolates, Madame—were poisoned."

"The chocolates *I* sent her? But that's impossible—impossible!"

"Not impossible, Madame, since Mademoiselle is at death's door."

"Oh! my God." She hid her face in her hands, then raised it white and quivering. "I don't understand—I don't understand. The other, yes, but not this. They couldn't be poisoned. Nobody ever touched them but me and Jim. You're making some dreadful mistake, M. Poirot."

"It is not I that make a mistake—even though my name was in the box."

She stared at him blankly.

"If Mademoiselle Nick dies—" he said, and made a threatening gesture with his hand.

She gave a low cry.

He turned away, and taking me by the arm, went up to the sitting-room. He flung his hat on the table.

"I understand nothing—but nothing! I am in the dark. I am a little child. Who stands to gain by Mademoiselle's death? Madame Rice. Who buys the chocolates and admits it and tells a story of being rung up on the telephone that cannot hold water for a minute? Madame Rice. It is too simple—too stupid. And she is not stupid—no."

"Well, then—"

"But she takes cocaine, Hastings. I am certain she takes cocaine. There is no mistaking it. And there was cocaine in those chocolates. And what does she mean when she said 'The other, yes, but not this.' It needs explaining, that! And the sleek M. Lazarus—what is he doing in all this? What does she know, Madame Rice? She knows something. But I cannot make her speak. She is not of those you can frighten into speech. But she knows something, Hastings. Is her tale of the telephone true, or did she invent it? If it is true, whose voice was it?

"I tell you, Hastings. This is all very black—very black."

"Always darkest before dawn," I said reassuringly.

He shook his head.

"Then the other box—that came by post. Can we rule that out? No, we cannot, because Mademoiselle is not sure. It is an annoyance, that!"

He groaned.

I was about to speak when he stopped me.

"No, no. Not another proverb. I cannot bear it. If you would be the good friend—the good helpful friend—"

"Yes," I said eagerly.

"Go out, I beg of you, and buy me some playing cards."

I stared.

"Very well," I said coldly.

I could not but suspect that he was making a deliberate excuse to get rid of me.

Here, however, I misjudged him. That night, when I came into the sitting-room about ten o'clock, I found Poirot carefully building card houses—and I remembered!

It was an old trick of his—soothing his nerves. He smiled at me.

"Yes—you remember. One needs the precision. One card on another—so—in exactly the right place and that supports the weight of the card on top and so on, up and up. Go to bed, Hastings. Leave me here, with my house of cards. I clear the mind."

It was about five in the morning when I was shaken awake.

Poirot was standing by my bedside. He looked pleased and happy.

"It was very just what you said, *mon ami*— Oh! it was very just. More, it was *spirituel!*"

I blinked at him, being imperfectly awake.

"Always darkest before dawn—that is what you said. It has been very dark—and now it is dawn."

I looked at the window. He was perfectly right.

"No, no, Hastings. In the head! The mind! The little grey cells!"

He paused and then said quietly.

"You see, Hastings, Mademoiselle is dead."

"What?" I cried, suddenly wide awake.

"Hush—hush. It is as I say. Not really—*bien entendu*—but it can be arranged. Yes, for twenty-four hours it can be arranged. I arrange it with the doctor, with the nurses.

"You comprehend, Hastings? The murderer has been successful. Four times he has tried and failed. The fifth time he has succeeded.

"And now, we shall see what happens next . . .

"It will be very interesting."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

THE EVENTS of the next day are completely hazy in my memory. I was unfortunate enough to awake with fever on me. I have been liable to these bouts of fever at inconvenient times ever since I once contracted malaria.

In consequence, the events of that day take on in my memory the semblance of a nightmare—with Poirot coming and going as a kind of fantastic clown, making a periodic appearance in a circus.

He was, I fancy, enjoying himself to the full. His pose of baffled despair was admirable. How he achieved the end he had in view and which he had disclosed to me in the early hours of the morning, I cannot say. But achieve it, he did.

It cannot have been easy. The amount of deception and subterfuge involved must have been colossal. The English character is averse to lying on a wholesale scale and that, no less, was what Poirot's plan required. He had, first, to get Dr Graham converted to the scheme. With Dr Graham on his side, he had to persuade the Matron and some members of the staff of the Nursing Home to conform to the plan. There again, the difficulties must have been immense. It was probably Dr Graham's influence that turned the scale.

Then there was the Chief Constable and the police. Here, Poirot would be up against officialdom. Nevertheless he wrung at last an unwilling consent out of Colonel Weston. The Colonel made it clear that it was in no way his responsibility. Poirot and Poirot alone was responsible for the spreading abroad of these lying reports. Poirot agreed. He would have agreed to anything so long as he was permitted to carry out his plan.

I spent most of the day dozing in a large armchair with a rug over my knees. Every two or three hours or so, Poirot would burst in and report progress.

"Comment ça va, mon ami? How I commiserate you. But it is as well, perhaps. The farce, you do not play it as well as I do. I come this moment from ordering a wreath—a wreath immense—stupendous. Lilies, my friend—large quantities of lilies. *'With heartfelt regret. From Hercule Poirot.'* Ah! what a comedy."

He departed again.

"I come from a most poignant conversation with Madame Rice," was his next piece of information. "Very well dressed in the black, that one. Her poor friend—what a tragedy! I groan sympathetically. Nick, she says, was so joyous, so full of life. Impossible to think of her as dead. I agree. 'It is, I say, the irony of death that it takes one like that. The old and useless are left.' Oh! là, là! I groan again."

"How you are enjoying this," I murmured feebly.

"Du tout. It is part of my plan, that is all. To play the comedy successfully, you must put the heart into it. Well, then, the conventional expressions of regret over, Madame comes to matters nearer home. All night she has lain awake wondering about those sweets. It is impossible—impossible. 'Madame,' I say. 'It is not impossible. You can see the analyst's report.' Then she says, and her voice is far from steady. 'It was—cocaine, you say?' I assent. And she says. 'Oh! my God. I don't understand.' "

"Perhaps that's true."

"She understands well enough that she is in danger. She is intelligent. I told you that before. Yes, she is in danger, and she knows it."

"And yet it seems to me that for the first time you don't believe her guilty."

Poirot frowned. The excitement of his manner abated.

"It is profound what you say there, Hastings. No—it seems to me that—somehow—the facts no longer fit. These crimes—so far what has marked them most—the subtlety, is it not? And here is no subtlety at all—only the crudity, pure and simple. No, it does not fit."

He sat down at the table.

"Voilà—let us examine the facts. There are three possibilities. There are the sweets bought by Madame and delivered by M. Lazarus. And in that case the guilt rests with one or the other or both. And the telephone call, supposedly from Mademoiselle Nick, that is an invention pure and simple. That is the straightforward—the obvious solution.

"Solution 2. The other box of sweets—that which came by post. Anyone may have sent those. Any of the suspects on our list from A to J. (You remember? A very wide field.) But, if that were the guilty box, what is the point of the telephone call? Why complicate matters with a second box?"

I shook my head feebly. With a temperature of 102, any complication seemed to me quite unnecessary and absurd.

"Solution 3. A poisoned box was substituted for the innocent box bought by Madame. In that case the telephone call is ingenious and understandable. Madame is to be what you call the kitten's paw. She is to pull the roasting chestnuts out of the fire. So Solution 3 is the most logical—but, alas, it is also the most difficult. How be sure of substituting a box at the right moment? The orderly might take the box straight upstairs—a hundred and one possibilities might prevent the substitution being effected. No, it does not seem sense."

"Unless it were Lazarus," I said.

Poirot looked at me.

"You have the fever, my friend. It mounts, does it not?"

I nodded.

"Curious how a few degrees of heat should stimulate the intellect. You have uttered there an observation of profound simplicity. So simple, was it, that I had failed to consider it. But it would suppose a very curious state of affairs. M. Lazarus, the dear friend of Madame, doing his best to get her hanged. It opens up possibilities of a very curious nature. But complex—very complex."

I closed my eyes. I was glad I had been brilliant, but I did not want to think of anything complex. I wanted to go to sleep.

Poirot, I think, went on talking, but I did not listen. His voice was vaguely soothing. . . .

It was late afternoon when I saw him next.

"My little plan, it has made the fortune of the flower shops," he announced. "Everybody orders wreaths. M. Croft, M. Vyse, Commander Challenger—"

The last name awoke a chord of compunction in my mind.

"Look here, Poirot," I said. "You must let him in on this. Poor fellow, he will be distracted with grief. It isn't fair."

"You have always the tenderness for him, Hastings."

"I like him. He's a thoroughly decent chap. You've got to take him into the secret."

Poirot shook his head.

"No, *mon ami.* I do not make the exceptions."

"But you don't suspect him of having anything to do with it?"

"I do not make the exceptions."

"Think how he must be suffering."

"On the contrary, I prefer to think of what a joyful surprise I prepare for him. To think the loved one dead—and find her alive! It is a sensation unique—stupendous."

"What a pig-headed old devil you are. He'd keep the secret all right."

"I am not so sure."

"He's the soul of honour. I'm certain of it."

"That makes it all the more difficult to keep a secret. Keeping a secret is an art that requires many lies magnificently told, and a great aptitude for playing the comedy and enjoying it. Could he dissemble, the Commander Challenger? If he is what you say he is, he certainly could not."

"Then you won't tell him?"

"I certainly refuse to imperil my little idea for the sake of the sentiment. It is life and death we play with, *mon cher.* Anyway, the suffering, it is good for the character. Many of your famous clergymen have said so—even a Bishop if I am not mistaken."

I made no further attempt to shake his decision. His mind, I could see, was made up.

"I shall not dress for dinner," he murmured. "I am too much the broken old man. That is my part, you understand. All my self-confidence has crashed—I am broken. I have failed. I shall eat hardly any dinner—the food untasted on the plate. That is the attitude, I think. In my own apartment I will consume some brioches and some chocolate éclairs (so called) which I had the foresight to buy at a confectioners. *Et vous?"*

"Some more quinine, I think," I said sadly.

"Alas, my poor Hastings. But courage, all will be well tomorrow."

"Very likely. These attacks often last only twenty-four hours."

I did not hear him return to the room. I must have been asleep.

When I awoke, he was sitting at the table writing. In front of him was a crumpled sheet of paper smoothed out. I recognized it for the paper on which he had written that list of people—A to J—which he had afterwards crumpled up and thrown away.

He nodded in answer to my unspoken thought.

"Yes, my friend, I have resurrected it. I am at work upon it from a different angle. I compile a list of questions concerning each person. The questions may have no bearing on the crime—they are just things that I do not know—things that remain unexplained and for which I seek to supply the answer from my own brain."

"How far have you got?"

"I have finished. You would like to hear? You are strong enough?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am feeling a great deal better."

"A la bonheur! Very well, I will read them to you. Some of them, no doubt, you will consider puerile."

He cleared his throat.

"A. Ellen.—Why did she remain in the house and not go out to see fireworks? (Unusual, as Mademoiselle's evidence and surprise make clear.) What did she think or suspect might happen? Did she admit anyone (J for instance) to the house? Is she speaking the truth about the secret panel? If there is such a thing why is she unable to remember where it is? (Mademoiselle seems very certain there is no such thing—and she would surely know.) If she invented it, why did she invent it? Had she read Michael Seton's love letters or was her surprise at Mademoiselle Nick's engagement genuine?

B. Her husband.—Is he as stupid as he seems? Does he share Ellen's knowledge whatever it is, or does he not? Is he, in any respect, a mental case?

C. The Child.—Is his delight in blood a natural instinct common to his age and development, or is it morbid, and is that morbidity inherited from either parent? Has he ever shot with a toy pistol?

D. Who is Mr Croft? Where does he really come from? Did he post the will as he swears he did? What motive could he have in not posting it?

E. Same as above.—Who are Mr and Mrs Croft? Are they in hiding for some reason—and if so, what reason? Have they any connexion with the Buckley family?

F. Mrs Rice.—Was she really aware of the engagement between Nick and Michael Seton? Did she merely guess it, or had she actually read the letters which passed between them? (In that case she would know Mademoiselle was Seton's heir.) Did she know that she herself was Mademoiselle's residuary legatee? (This, I think, is likely. Mademoiselle would probably tell her so, adding perhaps that she would not get much out of it.) Is there any truth in Commander Challenger's suggestion that Lazarus was attracted by Mademoiselle Nick? (This might explain a certain lack of cordiality between the two friends which seems to have shown itself in the last few months.) Who is the 'boy friend' mentioned in her note as supplying the drug? Could this possibly be J? Why did she turn faint one day in this room? Was it something that had been said—or was it something she *saw?* Is her account of the telephone message asking her to buy chocolates correct—or is it a deliberate lie? What did she mean by 'I can understand the other—but not this?' If she is not herself guilty, what knowledge has she got that she is keeping to herself?

"You perceive," said Poirot suddenly breaking off, "that the questions concerning Madame Rice are almost innumerable. From beginning to end, she is an enigma. And that forces me to a conclusion. Either Madame Rice is guilty—or she knows—or shall we say, thinks she knows who is guilty.

But is she right? Does she know or does she merely suspect? And how is it possible to make her speak?"

He sighed.

"Well, I will go on with my list of questions.

G. Mr Lazarus.—Curious—there are practically no questions to ask concerning him—except the crude one 'Did he substitute the poisoned sweets?' Otherwise I find only one totally irrelevant question. But I have put it down. 'Why did M. Lazarus offer fifty pounds for a picture that was only worth twenty?' "

"He wanted to do Nick a good turn," I suggested.

"He would not do it that way. He is a dealer. He does not buy to sell at a loss. If he wished to be amiable he would lend her money as a private individual."

"It can't have any bearing on the crime, anyway."

"No, that is true—but all the same, I should like to know. I am a student of the psychology, you understand.

"Now we come to H.

H. Commander Challenger.—Why did Mademoiselle Nick tell him she was engaged to someone else? What necessitated her having to tell him that? She told no one else. Had he proposed to her? What are his relations with his uncle?"

"His uncle, Poirot?"

"Yes, the doctor. That rather questionable character. Did any private news of Michael Seton's death come through to the Admiralty before it was announced publicly?"

"I don't quite see what you're driving at, Poirot. Even if Challenger knew beforehand about Seton's death, it does not seem to get us anywhere. It provides no earthly motive for killing the girl he loved."

"I quite agree. What you say is perfectly reasonable. But these are just things I should like to know. I am still the dog, you see, nosing about for the things that are not very nice!

I. M. Vyse.—Why did he say what he did about his cousin's fanatical devotion to End House? What possible motive could he have in saying that? Did he, or did he not, receive the will? Is he, in fact, an honest man—or is he not an honest man?

And now J.—*Eh bien,* J. is what I put down before—a giant question mark. Is there such a person, or is there not—

"Mon Dieu! my friend, what have you?"

I had started from my chair with a sudden shriek. With a shaking hand I pointed at the window.

"A face, Poirot!" I cried. "A face pressed against the glass. A dreadful face! It's gone now—but I saw it."

Poirot strode to the window and pushed it open. He leant out.

"There is no one there now," he said thoughtfully. "You are sure you did not imagine it, Hastings?"

"Quite sure. It was a horrible face."

"There is a balcony, of course. Anyone could reach there quite easily if they wanted to hear what we were saying. When you say a dreadful face, Hastings, just what do you mean?"

"A white staring face, hardly human."

"Mon ami, that is the fever. A face, yes. An unpleasant face, yes. But a face hardly human—no. What you saw was the effect of a face pressed closely against the glass—that allied to the shock of seeing it there at all."

"It was a dreadful face," I said obstinately.

"It was not the face of—anyone you knew?"

"No, indeed."

"Mm—it might have been, though! I doubt if you would recognize it under these circumstances. I wonder now—yes, I very much wonder . . ."

He gathered up his papers thoughtfully.

"One thing at least is to be the good. If the owner of that face overheard our conversation we did not mention that Mademoiselle Nick was alive and well. Whatever else our visitor may have heard, that at least escaped him."

"But surely," I said, "the results of this—er—brilliant manoeuvre of yours have been slightly disappointing up to date. Nick is dead and no startling developments have occurred!"

"I did not expect them yet awhile. Twenty-four hours, I said. *Mon ami,* tomorrow, if I am not mistaken, certain things will arise. Otherwise—otherwise I am wrong from start to finish. There is the post, you see. I have hopes of tomorrow's post."

I awoke in the morning feeling weak but with the fever abated. I also felt hungry. Poirot and I had breakfast served in our sitting-room.

"Well?" I said maliciously, as he sorted his letters. "Has the post done what you expected of it?"

Poirot, who had just opened two envelopes which patently contained bills did not reply. I thought he looked rather cast down and not his usual cock-a-hoop self.

I opened my own mail. The first was a notice of a Spiritualist meeting.

"If all else fails, we must go to the Spiritualists," I remarked. "I often wonder that more tests of this kind aren't made. The spirit of the victim comes back and names the murderer. That would be a proof."

"It would hardly help us," said Poirot absently. "I doubt if Maggie Buckley knew whose hand it was shot her down. Even if she could speak she would have nothing of value to tell us. *Tiens,* that is odd."

"What is?"

"You talk of the dead speaking, and at that moment I open this letter."

He tossed it across to me. It was from Mrs Buckley and ran as follows

Langley Rectory,

DEAR M. POIROT,

On my return here I found a letter written by my poor child on her arrival at St. Loo. There is nothing in it of interest to you, I'm afraid, but I thought perhaps you would care to see it.

Thanking you for your kindness,

Yours sincerely,
JEAN BUCKLEY.

The enclosure brought a lump to my throat. It was so terribly commonplace and so completely untouched by any apprehension of tragedy.

DEAR MOTHER,

I arrived safely. Quite a comfortable journey. Only two other people in the carriage all the way to Exeter.

It is lovely weather here. Nick seems very well and gay—a little restless perhaps, but I cannot see why she should have telegraphed for me in the way she did. Tuesday would have done just as well.

No more now. We are going to have tea with some neighbours. They are Australians and have rented the Lodge. Nick says they are kind but rather awful. Mrs Rice and Mr Lazarus are coming to stay. He is the Art dealer. I will post this in the box by the gate, then it will catch the post. Will write tomorrow,

Your loving daughter,
MAGGIE.

P.S. Nick says there is a reason for her wire. She will tell me after tea. She is very queer and jumpy.

"The voice of the dead," said Poirot quietly. "And it tells us—nothing."

"The box by the gate," I remarked idly. "That's where Croft said he posted the will."

"Said so—yes. I wonder. How I wonder!"

"There is nothing else of interest among your letters?"

"Nothing, Hastings, I am very unhappy. I am in the dark. Still in the dark. I comprehend nothing."

At that moment the telephone rang. Poirot went to it.

Immediately I saw a change come over his face. His manner was very restrained, nevertheless he could not disguise from my eyes his intense excitement.

His own contributions to the conversation were entirely non-committal so that I could not gather what it was all about.

Presently, however, with a *"Très bien. Je vous remercie"* he put back the receiver and came back to where I was sitting. His eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Mon ami," he said. "What did I tell you? Things have begun to happen."

"What was it?"

"That was M. Charles Vyse on the telephone. He informs me that this morning, through the post, he has received a will signed by his cousin, Miss Buckley, and dated the 25th of February last."

"What? *The* will?"

"Évidément."

"It has turned up?"

"Just at the right moment, *n'est ce pas?"*

"Do you think he is speaking the truth?"

"Or do I think he has had the will all along? Is that what you would say? Well, it is all a little curious. But one thing is certain I told you that if Mademoiselle Nick were supposed to be dead, we should have developments—and sure enough here they are!"

"Extraordinary," I said. "You were right. I suppose this is the will making Frederica Rice residuary legatee?"

"M. Vyse said nothing about the contents of the will. He was far too correct. But there seems very little reason to doubt that this is the same will. It is witnessed, he tells me, by Ellen Wilson and her husband."

"So we are back at the old problem," I said. "Frederica Rice."

"The enigma!"

"Frederica Rice." I murmured inconsequently. "It's a pretty name."

"Prettier than what her friends call her. Freddie—" he made a face—*"ce n'est pas jolie*—for a young lady."

"There aren't many abbreviations of Frederica," I said. "It's not like Margaret where you can have half a dozen—Maggie, Margot, Madge, Peggie—"

"True. Well, Hastings, are you happier now? That things have begun to happen?"

"Yes, of course. Tell me—did you expect this to happen?"

"No—not exactly. I had formulated nothing very precise to myself. All I had said was that given a certain result, the causes of that result must make themselves evident."

"Yes," I said respectfully.

"What was it that I was going to say just as that telephone rang?" mused Poirot. "Oh! yes, that letter from Mademoiselle Maggie. I wanted to look at it once again. I have an idea in the back of my mind that something in it struck me as rather curious."

I picked it up from where I had tossed it, and handed it to him.

He read it over to himself. I moved about the room, looking out of the window and observing the yachts racing on the bay.

Suddenly an exclamation startled me. I turned round.

Poirot was holding his head in his hands and rocking himself to and fro apparently in an agony of woe.

"Oh!" he groaned, "but I have been blind—blind."

"What's the matter?"

"Complex, I have said? Complicated? *Mais non.* Of a simplicity extreme—extreme. And miserable one that I am, I saw nothing—nothing."

"Good gracious, Poirot, what is this light that has suddenly burst upon you?"

"Wait—wait—do not speak? I must arrange my ideas. Rearrange them in the light of this discovery so stupendous."

Seizing his list of questions, he ran over them silently, his lips moving busily. Once or twice he nodded his head emphatically.

Then he laid them down and leaning back in his chair he shut his eyes. I thought at last that he had gone to sleep.

Suddenly he sighed and opened his eyes.

"But yes!" he said. "It all fits in! All the things that have puzzled me. All the things that have seemed to me a little unnatural. They all have their place."

"You mean—you know everything?"

"Nearly everything. All that matters. In some respects I have been right in my deductions. In other ways ludicrously far from the truth. But now it is all clear. I shall send today a telegram asking two questions—but the answers to them I know already—I know here!" He tapped his forehead.

"And when you receive the answers?" I asked curiously.

He sprang to his feet.

"My friend, do you remember that Mademoiselle Nick said she wanted to stage a play at End House? Tonight, we stage such a play in End House. But it will be a play produced by Hercule Poirot. Mademoiselle Nick will have a part to play in it." He grinned suddenly. "You comprehend, Hastings, there will be a ghost in this play. Yes, a ghost. End House has never seen a ghost. It will have one tonight. No—" as I tried to ask a question. "I will say no more. Tonight, Hastings, we will produce our comedy—and reveal the truth. But now, there is much to do—much to do."

He hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XIX

POIROT PRODUCES A PLAY

It was a curious gathering that met that night at End House.

I had hardly seen Poirot all day. He had been out for dinner but had left me a message that I was to be at End House at nine o'clock. Evening dress, he had added was not necessary.

The whole thing was like a rather ridiculous dream.

On arrival I was ushered into the dining-room, and when I looked round I realized that every person on Poirot's list from A to I (J, was necessarily excluded, being in the Mrs Harris-like position of "there ain't no sich person") was present.

Even Mrs Croft was there in a kind of invalid chair. She smiled and nodded at me.

"This is a surprise, isn't it?" she said cheerfully. "It makes a change for me, I must say. I think I shall try and get out now and again. All M. Poirot's idea. Come and sit by me, Captain Hastings. Somehow I feel this is rather a gruesome business—but Mr Vyse made a point of it."

"Mr Vyse?" I said rather surprised.

Charles Vyse was standing by the mantelpiece. Poirot was beside him talking earnestly to him in an undertone.

I looked round the room. Yes, they were all there. After showing me in (I had been a minute or two late) Ellen had taken her place on a chair just beside the door. On another chair, sitting painfully straight and breathing hard, was her husband. The child, Alfred, squirmed uneasily between his father and mother.

The rest sat round the dining-table. Frederica in her black dress, Lazarus beside her, George Challenger and Croft on the other side of the table. I sat a little away from it near Mrs Croft. And now Charles Vyse with a final nod of the head took his place at the head of the table and Poirot slipped unobtrusively into a seat next to Lazarus.

Clearly the producer, as Poirot had styled himself, did not propose to take a prominent part in the play. Charles Vyse was apparently in charge of the proceedings. I wondered what surprises Poirot had in store for him.

The young lawyer cleared his throat and stood up. He looked just the same as ever, impassive, formal and unemotional.

"This is rather an unconventional gathering we have here tonight," he said. "But the circumstances are very peculiar. I refer, of course, to the circumstances surrounding the death of my cousin, Miss Buckley. There will have, of course, to be an autopsy—there seems to be no doubt that she met her death by poison, and that poison was administered with the intent to kill. This is police business and I need not go into it. The police would doubtless prefer me not to do so.

"In an ordinary case, the will of a deceased person is read after the funeral, but in deference to M. Poirot's especial wish, I am proposing to read it here and now. That is why everyone has been asked to come here. As I said just now, the circumstances are unusual and justify a departure from precedent.

"The will itself came into my possession in a somewhat unusual manner. Although dated last February, it only reached me by post this morning. However, it is undoubtedly in the handwriting of my cousin—I have no doubt on that point, and though a most informal document, it is properly attested."

He paused and cleared his throat once more.

Every eye was upon his face.

From a long envelope in his hand, he drew out an enclosure. It was, as we could see, an ordinary piece of End House notepaper with writing on it.

"It is quite short," said Vyse. He made a suitable pause, then began to read.

"This is the last Will and Testament of Magdala Buckley. I direct that all my funeral expenses should be paid and I appoint my cousin Charles Vyse as my executor. I leave everything of which I die possessed to Mildred Croft in grateful recognition of the services rendered by her to my father Philip Buckley which services nothing can ever repay.

Signed Magdala Buckley
Witnesses Ellen Wilson
William Wilson

I was dumbfounded! So I think was everyone else. Only Mrs Croft nodded her head in quiet understanding.

"It's true," she said quietly. "Not that I ever meant to let on about it. Philip Buckley was out in Australia, and if it hadn't been for me—well, I'm not going into that. A secret it's been and a secret it had better remain. She knew about it, though. Nick did, I mean. Her father must have told her. We came down here because we wanted to have a look at the place. I'd always been curious about this End House Philip Buckley talked of. And that dear girl knew all about it, and couldn't do enough for us. Wanted us to come and live with her, she did. But we wouldn't do that. And so she insisted on our having the Lodge—and not a penny of rent would she take. We pretended to pay it, of course, so as not to cause talk, but she handed it back to us. And now—this! Well, if anyone says there is no gratitude in the world, I'll tell them they're wrong! This proves it."

There was still an amazed silence. Poirot looked at Vyse.

"Had you any idea of this?"

Vyse shook his head.

"I knew Philip Buckley had been in Australia. But I never heard any rumours of a scandal there."

He looked inquiringly at Mrs Croft.

She shook her head.

"No, you won't get a word out of me. I never have said a word and I never shall. The secret goes to the grave with me."

Vyse said nothing. He sat quietly tapping the table with a pencil.

"I presume, M. Vyse," Poirot leaned forward, "that as next of kin, you could contest that will? There is, I understand, a vast fortune at stake which was not the case when the will was made."

Vyse looked at him coldly.

"The will is perfectly valid. I should not dream of contesting my cousin's disposal of her property."

"You're an honest fellow," said Mrs Croft approvingly, "and I'll see you don't lose by it."

Charles shrank a little from this well-meant but slightly embarrassing remark.

"Well Mother," said Mr Croft, with an elation he could not quite keep out of his voice. "This is a surprise! Nick didn't tell me what she was doing."

"The dear sweet girl," murmured Mrs Croft putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "I wish she could look down and see us now. Perhaps she does—who knows?"

"Perhaps," agreed Poirot.

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike him. He looked round.

"An idea! We are all here seated round a table. Let us hold a *séance.*"

"A *séance?*" said Mrs Croft somewhat shocked. "But surely—"

"Yes, yes, it will be most interesting. Hastings, here, has pronounced mediumistic powers." (Why fix on me, I thought.) "To get through a message from the other world—the opportunity is unique! I feel the conditions are propitious. You feel the same, Hastings."

"Yes," I said resolutely, playing up.

"Good. I knew it. Quick, the lights."

In another minute he had risen and switched them off. The whole thing had been rushed on the company before they had had the energy to protest had they wanted to do so. As a matter of fact they were, I think, still dazed with astonishment over the will.

The room was not quite dark. The curtains were drawn back and the window was open for it was a hot night, and through those windows came a faint light. After a minute or two, as we sat in silence, I began to be able to make out the faint outlines of the furniture. I wondered very much what what I was supposed to do and cursed Poirot heartily for not having given me my instructions beforehand.

However, I closed my eyes and breathed in a rather stertorous manner.

Presently Poirot rose and tiptoed to my chair. Then returning to his own, he murmured:

"Yes, he is already in a trance. Soon—things will begin to happen."

There is something about sitting in the dark, waiting, that fills one with unbearable apprehension. I know that I myself was a prey to nerves and so, I am sure, was everyone else. And yet I had at least an idea of what was about to happen. I knew the one vital fact that no one else knew.

And yet, in spite of all that, my heart leapt into my mouth as I saw the dining-room door slowly opening.

It did so quite soundlessly (it must have been oiled) and the effect was horribly grisly. It swung slowly open and for a minute or two that was all. With its opening a cold blast of air seemed to enter the room. It was, I suppose, a common or garden draught owing to the open window, but it felt like the icy chill mentioned in all the ghost stories I have ever read.

And then we all saw it! Framed in the doorway was a white shadowy figure. Nick Buckley. . . .

She advanced slowly and noiselessly—with a kind of floating ethereal motion that certainly conveyed the impression of nothing human. . . .

I realized then what an actress the world had missed. Nick had wanted to play a part at End House. Now she was playing it, and I felt convinced that she was enjoying herself to the core. She did it perfectly.

She floated forward into the room—and the silence was broken.

There was a gasping cry from the invalid chair beside me. A kind of gurgle from Mr Croft. A startled oath from Challenger. Charles Vyse drew back his chair, I think. Lazarus leaned forward. Frederica alone made no sound or movement.

And then a scream rent the room. Ellen sprang up from her chair.

"It's her!" she shrieked. "She's come back. She's walking! Them that's murdered always walks. It's her! It's her!"

And then, with a click the lights went on.

I saw Poirot standing by them, the smile of the ring-master on his face. Nick stood in the middle of the room in her white draperies.

It was Frederica who spoke first. She stretched out an unbelieving hand —touched her friend.

"Nick," she said. "You're—you're real!"

It was almost a whisper.

Nick laughed. She advanced.

"Yes," she said. "I'm real enough. Thank you so much for what you did for my father, Mrs Croft. But I'm afraid you won't be able to enjoy the benefit of that will just yet."

"Oh! my God," gasped Mrs Croft. "Oh! my God." She twisted to and fro in her chair. "Take me away, Bert. Take me away. It was all a joke, my dear—all a joke, that's all it was. Honest."

"A queer sort of joke," said Nick.

The door had opened again and a man had entered so quietly that I had not heard him. To my surprise I saw that it was Japp. He exchange a quick nod with Poirot as though satisfying him of something. Then his face suddenly lit up and he took a step forward towards the squirming figure in the invalid chair.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo," he said. "What's this? An old friend! Milly Merton, I declare! And at your old tricks again, my dear."

He turned round in an explanatory way to the company, disregarding Mrs Croft's shrill protests.

"Cleverest forger we've ever had, Milly Merton. We knew there had been an accident to the car they made their last getaway in. But there! Even an injury to the spine wouldn't keep Milly from her tricks. She's an artist, she is!"

"Was that will a forgery?" said Vyse.

He spoke in tones of amazement.

"Of course it was a forgery," said Nick scornfully. "You don't think I'd make a silly will like that, do you? I left you End House, Charles, and everything else to Frederica."

She crossed as she spoke and stood by her friend, and just at that moment *it happened!*

A spurt of flame from the window and the hiss of a bullet. Then another and the sound of a groan and a fall outside. . . .

And Frederica on her feet with a thin trickle of blood running down her arm. . . .

CHAPTER XX

J.

IT WAS all so sudden that for a moment no one knew what had happened.

Then, with a violent exclamation, Poirot ran to the window. Challenger was with him.

A moment later they reappeared, carrying with them the limp body of a man. As they lowered him carefully into a big leather armchair and his face came into view, I uttered a cry.

"The face—the face at the window."

It was the man I had seen looking in on us the previous evening I recognized him at once. I realized that when I had said he was hardly human I had exaggerated as Poirot had accused me of doing.

Yet there was something about this face that justified my impression. It was a lost face—the face of one removed from ordinary humanity.

White, weak, depraved—it seemed a mere mask—as though the spirit within had fled long ago.

Down the side of it there trickled a stream of blood.

Frederica came slowly forward till she stood by the chair.

Poirot intercepted her.

"You are hurt, Madame?"

She shook her head.

"The bullet grazed my shoulder—that is all."

She put him aside with a gentle hand and bent down.

The man's eyes opened and he saw her looking down at him.

"I've done for you this time, I hope," he said in a low vicious snarl, and then, his voice changing suddenly till it sounded like a child's. "Oh! Freddie, I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. You've always been so decent to me. . . ."

"It's all right—"

She knelt down beside him.

"I didn't mean—"

His head dropped. The sentence was never finished.

Frederica looked up at Poirot.

"Yes, Madame, he is dead," he said gently.

She rose slowly from her knees and stood looking down at him. With one hand she touched his forehead—pitifully, it seemed. Then she sighed and turned to the rest of us.

"He was my husband," she said quietly.

"J," I murmured.

Poirot caught my remark and nodded a quick assent.

"Yes," he said softly. "Always I felt that there was a J. I said so from the beginning, did I not?"

"He was my husband," said Frederica again. Her voice was terribly tired. She sank into a chair that Lazarus brought for her. "I might as well tell you everything—now.

"He was—completely debased. He was a drug fiend. He taught me to take drugs. I have been fighting the habit ever since I left him. I think—at last—I am nearly cured. But it has been—difficult. Oh! so horribly difficult. Nobody knows how difficult!

"I could never escape from him. He used to turn up and demand money—with threats. A kind of blackmail. If I did not give him money he would shoot himself. That was always his threat. Then he took to threatening to shoot me. He was not responsible. He was mad—crazy. . . .

"I suppose it was he who shot Maggie Buckley. He didn't mean to shoot her, of course. He must have thought it was me.

"I ought to have said, I suppose. But after all, I wasn't sure. And those queer accidents Nick had—that made me feel that perhaps it wasn't him after all. It might have been someone quite different.

"And then—one day—I saw a bit of his handwriting on a torn piece of paper on M. Poirot's table. It was a part of a letter he had sent me. I knew then that M. Poirot was on the track.

"Since then I have felt that it was only a matter of time. . . .

"But I don't understand about the sweets. He wouldn't have wanted to poison Nick. And anyway, I don't see how he could have had anything to do with that. I've puzzled and puzzled."

She put both hands to her face, then took them away and said with a queer pathetic finality.

"That's all. . . ."

CHAPTER XXI

THE PERSON—K.

LAZARUS came quickly to her side.

"My dear," he said. "My dear."

Poirot went to the sideboard, poured out a glass of wine and brought it to her, standing over her while she drank it.

She handed the glass back to him and smiled.

"I'm all right now," she said. "What—what had we better do next?"

She looked at Japp, but the Inspector shook his head.

"I'm on a holiday, Mrs Rice. Just obliging an old friend—that's all I'm doing. The St. Loo police are in charge of the case."

She looked at Poirot.

"And M. Poirot is in charge of the St. Loo police?"

"Oh! *quelle idée, Madame!* I am a mere humble adviser."

"M. Poirot," said Nick. "Can't we hush it up?"

"You wish that, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes. After all—I'm the person most concerned. And there will be no more attacks on me—now."

"No, that is true. There will be no more attacks on you now."

"You're thinking of Maggie. But, M. Poirot, nothing will bring Maggie back to life again? If you make all this public, you'll only bring a terrible lot of suffering and publicity on Frederica—and she hasn't deserved it."

"You say she has not deserved it?"

"Of course she hasn't! I told you right at the beginning that she had a brute of a husband. You've seen tonight—what he was. Well, he's dead. Let that be the end of things. Let the police go on looking for the man who shot Maggie. They just won't find him, that's all."

"So that is what you say, Mademoiselle? Hush it all up."

"Yes. Please. Oh! please. Please, dear M. Poirot."

Poirot looked slowly round.

"What do you all say?"

Each spoke in turn.

"I agree," I said as Poirot looked at me.

"I, too," said Lazarus.

"Best thing to do," from Challenger.

"Let's forget everything that's passed in this room tonight." This very determinedly from Croft.

"You would say that!" interpolated Japp.

"Don't be hard on me, dearie," his wife sniffed to Nick who looked at her scornfully but made no reply.

"Ellen?"

"Me and William won't say a word, sir. Least said, soonest mended."

"And you, M. Vyse?"

"A thing like this can't be hushed up," said Charles Vyse. "The facts must be made known in the proper quarter."

"Charles," cried Nick.

"I'm sorry, dear. I look at it from the legal aspect."

Poirot gave a sudden laugh.

"So you are seven to one. The good Japp is neutral."

"I'm on holiday," said Japp with a grin. "I don't count."

"Seven to one. Only M. Vyse holds out—on the side of law and order! You know, M. Vyse, you are a man of character!"

Vyse shrugged his shoulders.

"The position is quite clear. There is only one thing to do."

"Yes—you are an honest man. *Eh bien*—I, too, range myself on the side of the minority. I too, am for the truth."

"M. Poirot!" cried Nick.

"Mademoiselle—you dragged me into the case. I came into it at your wish. You cannot silence me now."

He raised a threatening forefinger in a gesture that I knew well.

"Sit down—all of you, and I will tell you—the truth."

Silenced by his imperious attitude, we sat down meekly and turned attentive faces towards him.

"Écoutez! I have a list here—a list of persons connected with the crime. I numbered them with the letters of the alphabet including the letter J. J. stood for a person unknown—linked to the crime by one of the others. I did not know who J. was until tonight, but I know that there was such a person. The events of tonight have proved that I was right.

"But yesterday, I suddenly realized that I had made a grave error. I had made an omission. I added another letter to my list. The letter K."

"Another person unknown?" asked Vyse with a slight sneer.

"Not exactly. I adopted J. as the symbol for a person unknown. Another person unknown would be merely another J. K. has a different significance. It stands for a person who should have been included in the original list, but who was overlooked."

He bent over Frederica.

"Reassure yourself, Madame. Your husband was not guilty of murder. It was the person K. who shot Mademoiselle Maggie."

She stared.

"But who is K?"

Poirot nodded to Japp. He stepped forward and spoke in tones reminiscent of the days when he had given evidence in police courts.

"Acting on information received, I took up a position here early in the evening, having been introduced secretly into the house by M. Poirot. I was concealed behind the curtains in the drawing-room. When everyone was assembled in this room, a young lady entered the drawing-room and switched on the light. She made her made way to the fireplace and opened a small recess in the panelling that appeared to be operated with a spring. She took from the recess a pistol. With this in her hand she left the room. I followed her and opening the door a crack I was able to observe her further movements. Coats and wraps had been left in the hall by the visitors on arrival. The young lady carefully wiped the pistol with a handkerchief and then placed it in the pocket of a grey wrap, the property of Mrs Rice—"

A cry burst from Nick.

"This is untrue—every word of it!"

Poirot pointed a hand at her.

"Voilà!" he said. *"The person K.! It was Mademoiselle Nick who shot her cousin, Maggie Buckley."*

"Are you mad?" cried Nick. "Why should I kill Maggie?"

"In order to inherit the money left to her by Michael Seton! Her name too was Magdala Buckley—and it was to her he was engaged—not you."

"You—you—"

She stood there trembling—unable to speak. Poirot turned to Japp.

"You telephoned to the police?"

"Yes, they are waiting in the hall now. They've got the warrant."

"You're all mad!" cried Nick contemptuously. She moved swiftly to Frederica's side. "Freddie, give me your wrist watch as—as a souvenir, will you?"

Slowly Frederica unclasped the jewelled watch from her wrist and handed it to Nick.

"Thanks. And now—I suppose we must go through with this perfectly ridiculous comedy."

"The comedy you planned and produced in End House. Yes—but you should not have given the star part to Hercule Poirot. That, Mademoiselle, was your mistake—your very grave mistake."

CHAPTER XXII

THE END OF THE STORY

"YOU WANT me to explain?"

Poirot looked round with a gratified smile and the air of mock humility I knew so well.

We had moved into the drawing-room and our numbers had lessened. The domestics had withdrawn tactfully, and the Crofts had been asked to accompany the police. Frederica, Lazarus, Challenger, Vyse and I remained.

"Eh bien—I confess it—I was fooled—fooled completely and absolutely. The little Nick, she had me where she wanted me, as your idiom so well expresses it. Ah! Madame, when you said that your friend was a clever little liar—how right you were! How right!"

"Nick always told lies," said Frederica composedly. "That's why I didn't really believe in these marvellous escapes of hers."

"And I—imbecile that I was—did!"

"Didn't they really happen?" I asked. I was, I admit, still hopelessly confused.

"They were invented—very cleverly—to give just the impression they did."

"What was that?"

"They gave the impression that Mademoiselle Nick's life was in danger. But I will begin earlier than that. I will tell you the story as I have pieced it out—not as it came to me imperfectly and in flashes.

"At the beginning of the business then, we have this girl, this Nick Buckley, young and beautiful, unscrupulous, and passionately and fanatically devoted to her home."

Charles Vyse nodded.

"I told you that."

"And you were right. Mademoiselle Nick loved End House. But she had no money. The house was mortgaged. She wanted money—she wanted it feverishly—and she could not get it. She met this young Seton at Le Touquet, he is attracted by her. She knows that in all probability he is his uncle's heir and that that uncle is worth millions. Good, her star is in the ascendant, she thinks. But he is not really seriously attracted. He thinks her good fun, that is all. They meet at Scarborough, he takes her up in his machine and then—the catastrophe occurs. He meets Maggie and falls in love with her at first sight.

"Mademoiselle Nick is dumbfounded. Her cousin Maggie whom she has never even considered pretty! But to young Seton she is 'different.' The one girl in the world for him. They become secretly engaged. Only one person knows—has to know. That person is Mademoiselle Nick. The poor Maggie—she is glad that there is one person she can talk to. Doubtless she reads to her cousin parts of her fiancé's letters. So it is that Mademoiselle gets to hear of the will. She pays no attention to it at the time. But it remains in her mind.

"Then comes the sudden and unexpected death of Sir Matthew Seton and hard upon that the rumours of Michael Seton's being missing. And straight away an outrageous plan comes into our young lady's head. Seton does not know that her name is Magdala also. He only knows her as Nick. His will is clearly quite informal—a mere mention of a name. But in the eyes of the world Seton is her friend! It is with her that his name has been coupled. If she were to claim to be engaged to him, no one would be surprised. But to do that successfully Maggie must be out of the way.

"Time is short. She arranges for Maggie to come and stay in a few days time. Then she has her escapes from death. The picture whose cord she cuts through. The brake of the car that she tampers with. The boulder—that perhaps was natural and she merely invented the story of being underneath on the path.

"And then—she sees my name in the paper. (I told you, Hastings, everyone knew Hercule Poirot!) and she has the audacity to make me an accomplice! The bullet through the hat that falls at my feet. Oh! the pretty comedy. And I am taken in! I believe in the peril that menaces her! Bon! She has got a valuable witness on her side. I play into her hands by asking her to send for a friend.

"She seizes the chance and sends for Maggie to come a day earlier.

"How easy the crime is actually! She leaves us at the dinner table and after hearing on the wireless that Seton's death is a fact, she starts to put her plan into action. She has plenty of time then to take Seton's letters to Maggie—look through them and select the few that will answer her purpose. These she places in her own room. Then, later, she and Maggie leave the fireworks and go back to the house. She tells her cousin to put on her shawl. Then stealing out after her, she shoots her. Quick, into the house, the pistol concealed in the secret panel (of whose existence she thinks nobody knows). Then upstairs. There she waits till voices are heard. The body is discovered. It is her cue.

"Down she rushes and out through the window.

"How well she played her part! Magnificently! Oh! yes, she staged a fine drama here. The maid, Ellen, said this was an evil house. I am inclined to agree with her. It was from the house that Mademoiselle Nick took her inspiration."

"But those poisoned sweets," said Frederica. "I still don't understand about that."

"It was all part of the same scheme. Do you not see that if Nick's life was attempted after Maggie was dead that absolutely settled the question that Maggie's death had been a mistake.

"When she thought the time was ripe she rang up Madame Rice and asked her to get her a box of chocolates."

"Then it was her voice?"

"But, yes! How often the simple explanation is the true one! *N'est ce pas?* She made her voice sound a little different—that was all. So that you might be in doubt when questioned. Then, when the box arrived—again how simple. She fills three of the chocolates with cocaine (she had cocaine with her, cleverly concealed) eats one of them and is ill—but not too ill. She knows very well how much cocaine to take and just what symptoms to exaggerate.

"And the card—my card! Ah! *Sapristi*—she has a nerve! It was my card—the one I sent with the flowers. Simple, was it not? Yes, but it had to be thought of . . ."

There was a pause and then Frederica asked.

"Why did she put the pistol in my coat?"

"I thought you would ask that, Madame. It was bound to occur to you in time. Tell me—had it ever entered your head that Mademoiselle Nick no longer liked you? Did you ever feel that she might—hate you?"

"It's difficult to say," said Frederica slowly. "We lived an insincere life. She used to be fond of me."

"Tell me, M. Lazarus—it is not a time for false modesty, you understand—was there ever anything between you and her?"

"No," Lazarus shook his head. "I was attracted to her at one time. And then—I don't know why—I went off her."

"Ah!" said Poirot nodding his head sagely. "That was her tragedy. She attracted people—and then they 'went off her.' Instead of liking her better and better you fell in love with her friend. She began to hate Madame—Madame who had a rich friend behind her. Last winter when she made a will, she was fond of Madame. Later it was different.

"She remembered that will. She did not know that Croft had suppressed it—that it had never reached its destination. Madame (or so the world would say) had got a motive for desiring her death. So it was to Madame she telephoned asking her to get the chocolates. Tonight, the will would have been read, naming Madame her residuary legatee—and then the pistol would be found in her coat—the pistol with which Maggie Buckley was shot. If Madame found it, she might incriminate herself by trying to get rid of it."

"She must have hated me," murmured Frederica.

"Yes, Madame. You had what she had not—the knack of winning love, and keeping it."

"I'm rather dense," said Challenger, "but I haven't quite fathomed the will business yet?"

"No? That's a different business altogether—a very simple one. The Crofts are lying low down here. Mademoiselle Nick has to have an operation. She has made no will. The Crofts see a chance. They persuade her to make one and take charge of it for the post. Then, if anything happens to her—if she dies—they produce a cleverly forged will—leaving the money to Mrs Croft with a reference to Australia and Philip Buckley whom they know once visited that country.

"But Mademoiselle Nick has her appendix removed quite satisfactorily so the forged will is no good. For the moment, that is. Then the attempts on her life begin. The Crofts are hopeful once more. Finally, I announce her death. The chance is too good to be missed. The forged will is immediately posted to M. Vyse. Of course, to begin with, they naturally thought her much richer than she is. They knew nothing about the mortgage."

"What I really want to know, M. Poirot," said Lazarus, "is how you actually got wise to all this. When did you begin to suspect?"

"Ah! there I am ashamed. I was so long—so long—There were things that worried me—yes. Things that seemed not quite right. Discrepancies between what Mademoiselle Nick told me and what other people told me. Unfortunately, I always believed Mademoiselle Nick.

"And then, suddenly, I got a revelation. Mademoiselle Nick made one mistake. She was too clever. When I urged her to send for a friend she promised to do so—and suppressed the fact that she had already sent for Mademoiselle Maggie. It seemed to her less suspicious—but it was a mistake.

"For Maggie Buckley wrote a letter home immediately on arrival and in it she used one innocent phrase that puzzled me. '*I cannot see why she should have telegraphed for me in the way she did. Tuesday would have done just as well.*' What did that mention of Tuesday mean? It could only mean one thing. Maggie had been coming to stay on Tuesday anyway. But in that case Mademoiselle Nick had lied—or had at any rate suppressed the truth.

"And for the first time I looked at her in a different light. I criticized her statements. Instead of believing them, I said 'Suppose this were not true.' I remembered the discrepancies. 'How would it be if every time it was Mademoiselle Nick who was lying and not the other person?'

"I said to myself. 'Let us be simple. What has really happened?'

"And I saw that what had really happened was that Maggie Buckley had been killed. Just that! But who could want Maggie Buckley dead?

"And then I thought of something else—a few foolish remarks that Hastings had made not five minutes before. He had said that there were plenty of abbreviations for Margaret—Maggie, Margot, etc. And it suddenly occurred to me to wonder what was Mademoiselle Maggie's real name?

"Then, *tout d'un coup,* it came to me! Supposing her name was *Magdala!* It was a Buckley name, Mademoiselle Nick had told me so. Two Magdala Buckleys. Supposing . . .

"In my mind I ran over the letters of Michael Seton's that I had read. Yes—there was nothing impossible. There was a mention of Scarborough—but Maggie had been in Scarborough with Nick—her mother had told me so.

"And it explained one thing which had worried me. Why were there so few letters? If a girl keeps her love letters at all, she keeps all of them. Why these select few? Was there any peculiarity about them?

"And I remembered that there was no name mentioned in them. They all began differently—but they began with a term of endearment. Nowhere in them was there the name—*Nick.*

"And there was something else, something that I ought to have seen at once—that cried the truth aloud."

"What was that?"

"Why—this. Mademoiselle Nick underwent an operation for appendicitis on February 27th last. There is a letter of Michael Seton's dated March 2nd, and no mention of anxiety, of illness or anything unusual. That ought to have shown me that the letters were written to a different person altogether.

"Then I went through a list of questions that I had made. And I answered them in the light of my new idea.

"In all but a few isolated questions the result was simple and convincing. And I answered, too, another question which I had asked myself earlier. *Why did Mademoiselle Nick buy a black dress?* The answer was that she and her cousin had to be dressed alike, with the scarlet shawl as an additional touch. That was the true and convincing answer, not the other. A girl would not buy mourning before she knew her lover was dead. She would be unreal—unnatural.

"And so I, in turn, staged my little drama. And the thing I hoped for happened! Nick Buckley had been very vehement about the question of a secret panel. She had declared there was no such thing. But if there were—and I did not see why Ellen should have invented it—Nick must know of it. Why was she so vehement? Was it possible that she had hidden the pistol there? With the secret intention of using it to throw suspicion on somebody later?

"I let her see that appearances were very black against Madame. That was as she had planned. As I foresaw, she was unable to resist the crowning proof. Besides it was safer for herself. That secret panel might be found by Ellen and the pistol in it!

"We are all safely in here. She is waiting outside for her cue. It is absolutely safe, she thinks, to take the pistol from its hiding place and put it in Madame's coat. . . .

"And so—at the last—she failed. . . ."

Frederica shivered.

"All the same," she said. "I'm glad I gave her my watch."

"Yes, Madame."

She looked up at him quickly.

"You know that too?"

"What about Ellen?" I asked, breaking in. "Did she know or suspect anything?"

"No. I asked her. She told me that she decided to stay in the house that night because in her own phrase she 'thought something was up.' Apparently Nick urged her to see the fireworks rather too decisively. She had fathomed Nick's dislike of Madame. She told me that 'she felt in her bones something was going to happen' but she thought it was going to happen to Madame. She knew Miss Nick's temper, she said, and she was always a queer little girl."

"Yes," murmured Frederica. "Yes, let us think of her like that. A queer little girl. A queer little girl who couldn't help herself. . . . I shall—anyway."

Poirot took her hand and raised it gently to his lips.

Charles Vyse stirred uneasily.

"It's going to be a very unpleasant business," he said quietly. "I must see about some kind of defence for her, I suppose."

"There will be no need, I think," said Poirot gently. "Not if I am correct in my assumptions."

He turned suddenly on Challenger.

"That's where you put the stuff, isn't it?" he said. "In those wrist watches."

"I—I—" The sailor stammered—at a loss.

"Do not try and deceive me—with your hearty good-fellow manner. It has deceived Hastings—but it does not deceive *me*. You make a good thing out of it, do you not—the traffic in drugs— You and your uncle in Harley Street."

"M. Poirot!"

Challenger rose to his feet.

My little friend blinked up at him placidly.

"You are the useful 'boy friend.' Deny it if you like. But I advise you, if you do not want the facts put in the hands of the police—to go."

And to my utter amazement, Challenger did go. He went from the room like a flash. I stared after him open-mouthed.

Poirot laughed.

"I told you so, *mon ami*. Your instincts are always wrong. *C'est épatant!*"

"Cocaine was in the wrist watch—" I began.

"Yes, yes. That is how Mademoiselle Nick had it with her so conveniently at the Nursing Home. And having finished her supply in the chocolate box she asked Madame just now for hers which was full."

"You mean she can't do without it?"

"Non, non. Mademoiselle Nick is not an addict. Sometimes—for fun—that is all. But tonight she needed it for a different purpose. It will be a full dose this time."

"You mean—?" I gasped.

"It is the best way. Better than the hangman's rope. But pst! we must not say so before M. Vyse who is all law and order. Officially I know nothing. The contents of the wrist watch—it is the merest guess on my part."

"Your guesses are always right, M. Poirot," said Frederica.

"I must be going," said Charles Vyse, cold disapproval in his attitude as he left the room.

Poirot looked from Frederica to Lazarus.

"You are going to get married—eh?"

"As soon as we can."

"And indeed, M. Poirot," said Frederica, "I am not the drug taker you think. I have cut myself down to a tiny dose. I think now—with happiness in front of me—I shall not need a wrist watch any more."

"I hope you will have happiness, Madame," said Poirot gently. "You have suffered a great deal. And in spite of everything you have suffered, you have still the quality of mercy in your heart. . . ."

"I will look after her," said Lazarus. "My business is in a bad way but I believe I shall pull through. And if I don't—well, Frederica does not mind being poor—with me."

She shook her head smiling.

"It is late," said Poirot looking at the clock.

We all rose.

"We have spent a strange night in this strange house," Poirot went on. "It is, I think, as Ellen says, an evil house. . . ."

He looked up at the picture of old Sir Nicholas.

Then, with a sudden gesture, he drew Lazarus aside.

"I ask your pardon, but, of all my questions, there is one still unanswered. Tell me, why did you offer fifty pounds for that picture? It would give me much pleasure to know—so as, you comprehend, to leave nothing unanswered."

Lazarus looked at him with an impassive face for a minute or two. Then he smiled.

"You see, M. Poirot," he said. "I am a dealer."

"Exactly."

"That picture is not worth a penny more than twenty pounds. I knew that if I offered Nick fifty, she would immediately suspect it was worth more and would get it valued elsewhere. Then she would find that I had offered her far more than it was worth. The next time I offered to buy a picture she would not have got it valued."

"Yes, and then?"

"The picture on the far wall is worth at least five thousand pounds," said Lazarus dryly.

"Ah!" Poirot drew a long breath.

"Now I know everything," he said happily.

CAT
AMONG
THE PIGEONS

To STELLA and LARRY KIRWAN

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE SUMMER TERM 511

CHAPTER PAGE

I REVOLUTION IN RAMAT 521

II THE WOMAN ON THE BALCONY 526

III INTRODUCING MR. ROBINSON 533

IV RETURN OF A TRAVELLER 542

V LETTERS FROM MEADOWBANK SCHOOL 551

VI EARLY DAYS 556

VII STRAWS IN THE WIND 563

VIII MURDER 571

IX CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS 580

X FANTASTIC STORY 588

XI CONFERENCE 597

XII NEW LAMPS FOR OLD 602

XIII CATASTROPHE 610

XIV MISS CHADWICK LIES AWAKE 618

XV MURDER REPEATS ITSELF 624

XVI THE RIDDLE OF THE SPORTS PAVILION 629

XVII ALADDIN'S CAVE 638

XVIII CONSULTATION 646

XIX CONSULTATION CONTINUED 652

XX CONVERSATION 658

XXI GATHERING THREADS 663

XXII INCIDENT IN ANATOLIA 671

XXIII SHOWDOWN 673

XXIV POIROT EXPLAINS 683

XXV LEGACY 690

PROLOGUE

SUMMER TERM

IT WAS THE opening day of the summer term at Meadowbank school. The late afternoon sun shone down on the broad gravel sweep in front of the house. The front door was flung hospitably wide and, just within it, admirably suited to its Georgian proportions, stood Miss Vansittart, every hair in place, wearing an impeccably cut coat and skirt.

Some parents who knew no better had taken her for the great Miss Bulstrode herself, not knowing that it was Miss Bulstrode's custom to retire to a kind of holy of holies to which only a selected and privileged few were taken.

To one side of Miss Vansittart, operating on a slightly different plane, was Miss Chadwick, comfortable, knowledgeable, and so much a part of Meadowbank that it would have been impossible to imagine Meadowbank without her. It never had been without her. Miss Bulstrode and Miss Chadwick had started Meadowbank school together. Miss Chadwick wore pince-nez, stooped, was dowdily dressed, amiably vague in speech, and happened to be a brilliant mathematician.

Various welcoming words and phrases, uttered graciously by Miss Vansittart, floated through the house.

"How do you do, Mrs. Arnold? Well, Lydia, did you enjoy your Hellenic cruise? What a wonderful opportunity! Did you get some good photographs?

"Yes, Lady Garnett, Miss Bulstrode had your letter about the art classes and everything's been arranged.

"How are you, Mrs. Bird? Well? I don't think Miss Bulstrode will have time today to discuss the point. Miss Rowan is somewhere about if you'd like to talk to her about it.

"We've moved your bedroom, Pamela. You're in the far wing by the apple tree . . .

"Yes, indeed, Lady Violet, the weather has been terrible so far this spring. Is this your youngest? What is his name? Hector? What a nice aeroplane you have, Hector.

"Très heureuse de vous voir, Madame. Ah, je regrette, ce ne serait pas possible, cette après-midi. Mademoiselle Bulstrode est tellement occupée.

"Good afternoon, Professor. Have you been digging up some more interesting things?"

ii

In a small room on the first floor, Ann Shapland, Miss Bulstrode's secretary, was typing with speed and efficiency. Ann was a nice-looking young woman of thirty-five, with hair that fitted her like a black satin cap. She could be attractive when she wanted to be, but life had taught her that efficiency and competence often paid better results, and avoided painful complications. At the moment she was concentrating on being everything that a secretary to a headmistress of a famous girls' school should be.

From time to time, as she inserted a fresh sheet in her machine, she looked out of the window and registered interest in the arrivals.

"Goodness!" said Ann to herself, awed, "I didn't know there were so many chauffeurs left in England!"

Then she smiled in spite of herself, as a majestic Rolls moved away and a very small Austin of battered age drove up. A harassed looking father emerged from it with a daughter who looked far calmer than he did.

As he paused uncertainly, Miss Vansittart emerged from the house and took charge.

"Major Hargreaves? And this is Alison? Do come into the house. I'd like you to see Alison's room for yourself. I . . ."

Ann grinned and began to type again.

"Good old Vansittart, the glorified understudy," she said to herself. "She can copy all the Bulstrode's tricks. In fact she's word perfect!"

An enormous and almost incredibly opulent Cadillac, painted in two tones, raspberry red and azure blue, swept (with difficulty, owing to its length) into the drive and drew up behind Major the Hon. Alistair Hargreaves' ancient Austin.

The chauffeur sprang to open the door. An immense, bearded, dark-skinned man, wearing a flowing aba, stepped out; a Parisian fashion plate followed; and then a slim dark girl.

"That's probably Princess Whatshername herself," thought Ann. "Can't imagine her in school uniform, but I suppose the miracle will be apparent tomorrow . . ."

Both Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick appeared on this occasion.

"They'll be taken to the Presence," decided Ann.

Then she thought that, strangely enough, one didn't quite like making jokes about Miss Bulstrode. Miss Bulstrode was Someone.

"So you'd better mind your P's and Q's, my girl," she said to herself, "and finish these letters without making any mistakes."

Not that Ann was in the habit of making mistakes. She could take her pick of secretarial posts. She had been personal assistant to the chief executive of an oil company, private secretary to Sir Mervyn Todhunter, renowned alike for his erudition, his irritability and the illegibility of his handwriting. She numbered two Cabinet Ministers and an important Civil Servant among her employers. But on the whole, her work had always lain among men. She wondered how she was going to like being as she put it to herself, completely submerged in women. Well—it was all experience! And there was always Denis! Faithful Denis, returning from Malaya, from Burma, from various parts of the world, always the same, devoted, asking her once again to marry him. Dear Denis! But it would be very dull to be married to Denis.

She would miss the company of men in the near future. All these schoolmistressy characters—not a man about the place, except a gardener of about eighty.

But here Ann got a surprise. Looking out of the window, she saw there was a man clipping the hedge just beyond the drive—clearly a gardener but a long way from eighty. Young, dark, good-looking. Ann wondered about him—there had been some talk of getting extra labour—but this was no yokel. Oh, well, nowadays people did every kind of job. Some young man trying to get together some money for some project or other, or indeed just to keep body and soul together. But he was cutting the hedge in a very expert manner. Presumably he was a real gardener after all!

"He looks," said Ann to herself, "he looks as though he might be amusing . . ."

Only one more letter to do, she was pleased to note, and then she might stroll round the garden.

iii

Upstairs, Miss Johnson, the matron, was busy allotting rooms, welcoming newcomers, and greeting old pupils.

She was pleased it was term time again. She never knew quite what to do with herself in the holidays. She had two married sisters with whom she stayed in turn, but they were naturally more interested in their own doings and families than in Meadowbank. Miss Johnson, though dutifully fond of her sisters, was really only interested in Meadowbank.

Yes, it was nice that term had started.

"Miss Johnson?"

"Yes, Pamela."

"I say, Miss Johnson, I think something's broken in my case. It's oozed all over things. I think it's hair oil."

"Chut, chut!" said Miss Johnson, hurrying to help.

iv

On the grass sweep of lawn beyond the gravelled drive, Mademoiselle Blanche, the new French mistress was walking. She looked with appreciative eyes at the powerful young man clipping the hedge.

"Assez bien," thought Mademoiselle Blanche.

Mademoiselle Blanche was slender and mouselike and not very noticeable, but she herself noticed everything.

Her eyes went to the procession of cars sweeping up to the front door. She assessed them in terms of money. This Meadowbank was certainly *formidable!* She summed up mentally the profits that Miss Bulstrode must be making.

Yes, indeed! *Formidable!*

v

Miss Rich who taught English and geography, advanced toward the house at a rapid pace, stumbling a little now and then because, as usual, she forgot to look where she was going. Her hair, also as usual, had escaped from its bun. She had an eager ugly face.

She was saying to herself:

"To be back again! To be *here* . . . It seems years . . ." She fell over a rake, and the young gardener put out an arm and said:

"Steady, miss."

Eileen Rich said, "Thank you," without looking at him.

vi

Miss Rowan and Miss Blake, the two junior mistresses, were strolling toward the Sports Pavilion. Miss Rowan was thin and dark and intense; Miss Blake was plump and fair. They were discussing with animation their recent adventures in Florence; the pictures they had seen, the sculpture, the fruit blossoms, and the attentions (hoped to be dishonourable) of two young Italian gentlemen.

"Of course one knows," said Miss Blake, "how Italians go on."

"Uninhibited," said Miss Rowan who had studied psychology as well as economics. "Thoroughly healthy, one feels. No repressions."

"But Giuseppe was quite impressed when he found I taught at Meadowbank," said Miss Blake. "He became much more respectful at once. He has a cousin who wants to come here, but Miss Bulstrode was not sure she had a vacancy."

"Meadowbank is a school that really counts," said Miss Rowan, happily. "Really, the new Sports Pavilion looks most impressive. I never thought it would be ready in time."

"Miss Bulstrode said it had to be," said Miss Blake in the tone of one who has said the last word.

"Oh," she added in a startled kind of way.

The door of the Sports Pavilion had opened abruptly, and a bony young woman with ginger coloured hair emerged. She gave them a sharp unfriendly stare and moved rapidly away.

"That must be the new games mistress," said Miss Blake. "How uncouth!"

"Not a very pleasant addition to the staff," said Miss Rowan. "Miss Lorrimer was always so friendly and sociable."

"She absolutely glared at us," said Miss Blake resentfully.

They both felt quite ruffled.

vii

Miss Bulstrode's sitting room had windows looking out in two directions, one over the drive and lawn beyond, and another toward a bank of rhododendrons behind the house. It was quite an impressive room, and Miss Bulstrode was rather more than quite an impressive woman. She was tall, and rather noble looking, with well dressed grey hair, grey eyes with plenty of humour in them and a firm mouth. The success of her school (and Meadowbank was one of the most successful schools in England) was entirely due to the personality of its Headmistress. It was a very expensive school, but that was not really the point. It could be put better by saying that though you paid through the nose, you got what you paid for.

Your daughter was educated in the way you wished, and also in the way Miss Bulstrode wished, and the result of the two together seemed to give satisfaction. Owing to the high fees, Miss Bulstrode was able to employ a full staff. There was nothing mass produced about the school, but if it was individualistic, it also had discipline. Discipline without regimentation, was Miss Bulstrode's motto. Discipline, she held, was reassuring to the young, it gave them a feeling of security; regimentation gave rise to irritation. Her pupils were a varied lot. They included several foreigners of good family, often foreign royalty. There were also English girls of good family or of wealth, who wanted a training in culture and the arts, with a general knowledge of life and social facility who would be turned out agreeable, well groomed and able to take part in intelligent discussion on any subject. There were girls who wanted to work hard and pass entrance examinations, and eventually take degrees and who, to do so, needed only good teaching and special attention. There were girls who had reacted unfavourably to school life of the conventional type. But Miss Bulstrode had her rules. She did not accept morons, or juvenile delinquents, and she preferred to accept girls whose parents she liked, and girls in whom she herself saw a prospect of development. The ages of her pupils varied within wide limits. There were girls who would have been labelled in the past as being "finished," and there were girls little more than children, some of them with parents abroad, and for whom Miss Bulstrode had a scheme of interesting holidays. The last and final court of appeal was Miss Bulstrode's own approval.

She was standing now by the chimneypiece listening to Mrs. Gerald Hope's slightly whining voice. With great foresight, she had not suggested that Mrs. Hope should sit down.

"Henrietta, you see, is very highly strung. Very highly strung indeed. Our doctor says . . ."

Miss Bulstrode nodded, with gentle reassurance, refraining from the caustic phrase she sometimes was tempted to utter.

"Don't you know, you idiot, that that is what every fool of a woman says about her child?"

She spoke with firm sympathy.

"You need have no anxiety, Mrs. Hope. Miss Rowan, a member of our staff, is a fully trained psychologist. You'll be surprised, I'm sure, at the change you'll find in Henrietta (who's a nice intelligent child, and far too good for you) after a term or two here."

"Oh, I know. You did wonders for the Lambeth child—absolutely wonders! So I'm quite happy. And I—oh, yes, I forgot. We're going to the South of France in six weeks' time. I thought I'd take Henrietta. It would make a little break for her."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," said Miss Bulstrode—briskly and with a charming smile, as though she were granting a request instead of refusing one.

"Oh! but—" Mrs. Hope's weak petulant face wavered, showed temper. "Really, I must insist. After all, she's *my* child."

"Exactly. But it's *my* school," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Surely I can take the child away from a school any time I like?"

"Oh, yes," said Miss Bulstrode. "You can. Of course you can. But then, I wouldn't have her back."

Mrs. Hope was in a real temper now.

"Considering the size of the fees I pay here . . ."

"Exactly," said Miss Bulstrode. "You wanted my school for your daughter, didn't you? But it's take it as it is, or leave it. Like that very charming Balenciaga model you are wearing. It is Balenciaga, isn't it? It is so delightful to meet a woman with a real clothes sense."

Her hand enveloped Mrs. Hope's, shook it, and imperceptibly guided her toward the door.

"Don't worry at all. Ah, here is Henrietta waiting for you." She looked with approval at Henrietta, a nice well balanced intelligent child if ever there was one, and who deserved a better mother. "Margaret, take Henrietta Hope to Miss Johnson."

Miss Bulstrode retired into her sitting room and a few moments later was talking French.

"But certainly, Excellence, your niece can study modern ballroom dancing. Most important socially. And languages, also, are most necessary."

The next arrivals were prefaced by such a gust of expensive perfume as almost to knock Miss Bulstrode backward.

"Must pour a whole bottle of the stuff over herself every day," Miss Bulstrode noted mentally, as she greeted the exquisitely dressed, dark-skinned woman.

"Enchanté, madame."

Madame giggled very prettily.

The big bearded man in Oriental dress took Miss Bulstrode's hand, bowed over it, and said in very good English, "I have the honour to bring to you the Princess Shaista."

Miss Bulstrode knew all about her new pupil who had just come from a school in Switzerland, but was a little hazy as to who it was escorting her. Not the Emir himself, she decided; probably the Minister, or a chargé d'affaires. As usual when in doubt, she used that useful title *Excellence,* and assured him that Princess Shaista would have the best of care.

Shaista was smiling politely. She also was fashionably dressed and perfumed. Her age, Miss Bulstrode knew, was fifteen, but like many Eastern and Mediterranean girls, she looked older—quite mature. Miss Bulstrode spoke to her about her projected studies and was relieved to find that she answered promptly in excellent English and without giggling. In fact, her manners compared favourably with the awkward ones of many English school girls of fifteen. Miss Bulstrode had often thought that it might be an excellent plan to send English girls abroad to the Near Eastern countries to learn courtesy and manners there. More compliments were uttered on both sides and then the room was empty again though still filled with such heavy perfume that Miss Bulstrode opened both windows to their full extent to let some of it out.

The next comers were Mrs. Upjohn and her daughter Julia. Mrs. Upjohn was an agreeable young woman in the late thirties, with sandy hair, freckles and an unbecoming hat which was clearly a concession to the seriousness of the occasion, since she was obviously the type of young woman who usually went hatless.

Julia was a plain freckled child, with an intelligent forehead, and an air of good humour.

The preliminaries were quickly gone through and Julia was dispatched via Margaret to Miss Johnson, saying cheerfully as she went, "So long, Mum. Do be careful lighting that gas heater now I'm not there to do it."

Miss Bulstrode turned smilingly to Mrs. Upjohn, but did not ask her to sit. It was possible that, despite Julia's appearance of cheerful common sense, her mother, too, might want to explain that her daughter was highly strung.

"Is there anything special you want to tell me about Julia?" she asked.

Mrs. Upjohn replied cheerfully:

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Julia's a very ordinary sort of child. Quite healthy and all that. I think she's got reasonably good brains, too, but I daresay mothers usually think that about their children, don't they?"

"Mothers," said Miss Bulstrode grimly, "vary!"

"It's wonderful for her to be able to come here," said Mrs. Upjohn. "My aunt's paying for it, really, or helping. I couldn't afford it myself. But I'm awfully pleased about it. And so is Julia." She moved to the window as she said enviously, "How lovely your garden is. And so tidy. You must have lots of real gardeners."

"We had three," said Miss Bulstrode, "but just now we're short-handed except for local labour."

"Of course the trouble nowadays," said Mrs. Upjohn, "is that what one calls a gardener usually isn't a gardener, just a milkman who wants to do something in his spare time, or an old man of eighty. I sometimes think . . . Why!" exclaimed Mrs. Upjohn, still gazing out of the window, "how extraordinary!"

Miss Bulstrode paid less attention to this sudden exclamation than she should have done. For at that moment she herself had glanced casually out of the other window which gave onto the rhododendron shrubbery, and had perceived a highly unwelcome sight, none other than Lady Veronica Carlton-Sandways, weaving her way along the path, her large black velvet hat on one side, muttering to herself and clearly in a state of advanced intoxication.

Lady Veronica was not an unknown hazard. She was a charming woman, deeply attached to her twin daughters, and very delightful when she was, as they put it, herself—but unfortunately at unpredictable intervals, she was not herself. Her husband, Major Carlton-Sandways, coped fairly well. A cousin lived with them, who was usually at hand to keep an eye on Lady Veronica and head her off if necessary. On Sports Day with both Major Carlton-Sandways and the cousin in close attendance Lady Veronica arrived completely sober and beautifully dressed and was a pattern of what a mother should be. But there were times when Lady Veronica gave her well wishers the slip, tanked herself up and made a beeline for her daughters to assure them of her maternal love. The twins had arrived by train early today, and no one had expected Lady Veronica.

Mrs. Upjohn was still talking. But Miss Bulstrode was not listening. She was reviewing various courses of action, for she recognized that Lady Veronica was fast approaching the truculent stage. But suddenly, an answer to prayer, Miss Chadwick appeared at a brisk trot, slightly out of breath. Faithful Chaddy, thought Miss Bulstrode. Always to be relied upon, whether it was a severed artery or an intoxicated parent.

"Disgraceful," said Lady Veronica to her loudly. "Tried to keep me away—didn't want me to come down here—I fooled Edith all right. Went have my rest—got out car—gave silly old Edith slip . . . regular old maid . . . no man would ever look at her twice . . . Had a row with police on the way . . . said I was unfit to drive car . . . nonshense . . . Going to tell Miss Bulstrode I'm taking the girls home—want'em home, mother love. Wonderful thing, mother love . . ."

"Splendid, Lady Veronica," said Miss Chadwick. "We're so pleased you've come. I particularly want you to see the new Sports Pavilion. You'll love it."

Adroitly she turned Lady Veronica's unsteady footsteps in the opposite direction, leading her away from the house.

"I expect we'll find your girls there," she said brightly. "Such a nice Sports Pavilion, new lockers, and a drying room for the Sports swim suits . . ." Their voices trailed away.

Miss Bulstrode watched. Once Lady Veronica tried to break away and return to the house, but Miss Chadwick was a match for her. They disappeared round the corner of the rhododendrons, headed for the distant loneliness of the new Sports Pavilion.

Miss Bulstrode heaved a sigh of relief. Excellent Chaddy. So reliable! Not modern. Not brainy—apart from mathematics. But always a present help in time of trouble.

She turned with a sigh and a sense of guilt to Mrs. Upjohn who had been talking happily for some time.

". . . though, of course," she was saying, "never real cloak and dagger stuff. Not dropping by parachute, or sabotage, or being a courier. I shouldn't have been brave enough. It was mostly very dull. Office work. And plotting. Plotting things on a map, I mean—not the storytelling kind of plotting. But of course it was exciting sometimes and it was often quite funny, as I just said—all the secret agents following each other round and round Geneva, all knowing each other by sight, and often ending up in the same bar. I wasn't married then, of course. It was all great fun."

She stopped abruptly with an apologetic and friendly smile.

"I'm sorry I've been talking so much. Taking up your time. When you've got such lots of people to see."

She held out a hand, said goodby and departed.

Miss Bulstrode stood frowning for a moment. Without knowing exactly why, she felt uneasy. Some instinct warned her that she had missed something that might be important.

She brushed the feeling aside. This was the opening day of summer term, and she had many more parents to see. Never had her school been more popular, more assured of success. Meadowbank was at its zenith.

There was nothing to tell her that within a few weeks Meadowbank would be plunged into a sea of trouble; that disorder, confusion and murder would reign there, that already certain events had been set in motion . . .

CHAPTER I

REVOLUTION IN RAMAT

ABOUT TWO MONTHS earlier than the first day of the summer term at Meadowbank, certain events had taken place which were to have unexpected repercussions in that celebrated girls' school.

In the Palace at Ramat, two young men sat smoking and considering the immediate future. One young man was dark, with a smooth olive face and large melancholy eyes. He was Prince Ali Yusuf, Hereditary Sheik of Ramat, which, though small, was one of the richest states in the Middle East. The other young man was sandy-haired and freckled, and more or less penniless except for the handsome salary he drew as private pilot to His Highness Prince Ali Yusuf. In spite of this difference in status, they were on terms of perfect equality. They had been at the same public school and had been friends then and ever since.

"They shot at us, Bob," said Prince Ali almost incredulously.

"They shot at us all right," said Bob Rawlinson.

"And they meant it. They meant to bring us down."

"The bastards meant it all right," said Bob grimly.

Ali considered for a moment.

"It would hardly be worth while trying it again?"

"We mightn't be so lucky this time. The truth is, Ali, we've left things too late. You should have got out two weeks ago. I told you so."

"One doesn't like to run away," said the ruler of Ramat.

"I see your point. But remember what Shakespeare or one of those poetical fellows said about those who run away living to fight another day."

"To think," said the young Prince with feeling, "of the money that has gone into making this a Welfare State. Hospitals, schools, a health service . . ."

Bob Rawlinson interrupted the catalogue.

"Couldn't the Embassy do something?"

Ali Yusuf flushed angrily.

"Take refuge in your Embassy? That, never. The extremists would probably storm the place—they wouldn't respect diplomatic immunity. Besides, if I did that, it really would be the end! Already the chief accusation against me is of being pro-Western." He sighed. "It is so difficult to understand." He sounded wistful, younger than his twenty-five years. "My grandfather was a cruel man, a real tyrant. He had hundreds of slaves and treated them ruthlessly. In his tribal wars, he killed his enemies unmercifully and executed them horribly. The mere whisper of his name made everyone turn pale. And yet—he is a legend still! Admired! Respected! The great Achmed Abdullah! And I? What have I done? Built hospitals and schools, welfare, housing . . . all the things people are said to want. Don't they want them? Would they prefer a reign of terror like my grandfather's?"

"I expect so," said Bob Rawlinson. "Seems a bit unfair, but there it is."

"But why, Bob? Why?"

Bob Rawlinson sighed, wriggled and endeavoured to explain what he felt. He had to struggle with his own inarticulateness.

"Well," he said. "He put up a show—I suppose that's it really. He was—sort of—dramatic, if you know what I mean."

He looked at his friend who was definitely not dramatic. A nice quiet decent chap, sincere and perplexed, that was what Ali was, and Bob liked him for it. He was neither picturesque nor violent, but while in England people who are picturesque and violent cause embarrassment and are not much liked, in the Middle East, Bob was fairly sure, it was different.

"But democracy—" began Ali.

"Oh, democracy—" Bob waved his pipe. "That's a word that means different things everywhere. One thing's certain, it never means what the Greeks originally meant by it. I bet you anything you like that if they boot you out of here, some spouting hot-air merchant will take over, yelling his own praises, building himself up into God Almighty, and stringing up, or cutting off the heads of anyone who dares to disagree with him in any way. And, mark you, he'll say it's a democratic government, of the people and for the people. I expect the people will like it, too. Exciting for them. Lots of bloodshed."

"But we are not savages! We are civilized nowadays."

"There are different kinds of civilization . . ." said Bob vaguely. "Besides—I rather think we've all got a bit of the savage in us—if we can think up a good excuse for letting it rip."

"Perhaps you are right," said Ali sombrely.

"The thing people don't seem to want anywhere, nowadays," said Bob, "is anyone who's got a bit of ordinary common sense. I've never been a brainy chap—well, you know that well enough, Ali—but I often think that that's the only thing the world really needs—just a bit of common sense." He laid aside his pipe and sat up in his chair. "But never mind all that. The thing is how we're going to get you out of here. Is there anybody in the Army you can really trust?"

Slowly, Prince Ali Yusuf shook his head.

"A fortnight ago I should have said 'Yes.' But now, I do not know . . . cannot be sure . . ."

Bob nodded. "That's the hell of it. As for this Palace of yours, it gives me the creeps."

Ali acquiesced without emotion.

"Yes, there are spies everywhere in palaces . . . They hear everything—they—know everything."

"Even down at the hangers—" Bob broke off. "Old Achmed's all right. He's got a kind of sixth sense. Found one of the mechanics trying to tamper with the plane—one of the men we'd have sworn was absolutely trustworthy. Look here, Ali, if we're going to have a shot at getting you away, it will have to be soon."

"I know—I know. I think—I am quite certain now—that if I stay I shall be killed."

He spoke without emotion, or any kind of panic, with a mild detached interest.

"We'll stand a good chance of being killed anyway," Bob warned him. "We'll have to fly out North, you know. They can't intercept us that way. But it means going over the mountains—and at this time of year . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You've got to understand. It's damned risky."

Ali Yusuf looked distressed.

"If anything happened to you, Bob—"

"Oh, don't worry about me, Ali. That's not what I meant. I'm not important. And anyway, I'm the sort of chap that's sure to get killed sooner or later. I'm always doing crazy things. No—it's you—I don't want to persuade you one way or the other. If a portion of the Army is loyal . . ."

"I do not like the idea of running away," said Ali simply. "But I do not in the least want to be a martyr, and be cut to pieces by a mob."

He was silent for a moment or two.

"Very well then," he said at last with a sigh. "We will make the attempt. When?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Sooner the better. We've got to get you to the airstrip in some natural way. How about saying you're going to inspect the new road construction out at Al Jasar? Sudden whim. Go this afternoon. Then, as your car passes the airstrip, stop there—I'll have the bus all ready and tuned up. The idea will be to go up to inspect the road construction from the air, see? We take off and go! We can't take any baggage, of course. It's got to be all quite impromptu."

"There is nothing I wish to take with me—except one thing—"

He smiled, and suddenly the smile altered his face and made a different person of him. He was no longer the modern conscientious Westernized young man—the smile held all the racial guile and craft which had enabled a long line of his ancestors to survive.

"You are my friend, Bob, you shall see."

His hand went inside his shirt and fumbled. Then he held out a little chamois leather bag.

"This?" Bob frowned and looked puzzled.

Ali took it back from him, untied the neck, and poured the contents on the table.

Bob held his breath for a moment then expelled it in a soft whistle.

"Good Lord. Are they real?"

Ali looked amused.

"Of course they are real. Most of them belonged to my father. He acquired new ones every year. I, too. They have come from many places, bought for our family by men we can trust. From London, from Calcutta, from South Africa. It is a tradition of our family. To have these in case of need." He added in a matter-of-fact voice: "They are worth, at today's prices, about three quarters of a million."

"Three quarters of a million pounds." Bob let out a whistle, picked up the stones, let them run through his fingers. "It's fantastic. Like a fairy tale. It does things to you."

"Yes." The dark young man nodded. Again that age-long weary look was on his face. "Men are not the same when it comes to jewels. There is always a trail of violence to follow such things. Death, bloodshed, murder. And women will be the worst. For with women it will not only be the value. It is something to do with the jewels themselves. Beautiful jewels drive women mad. They want to own them. To wear them round their throats, on their bosoms. I would not trust any woman with these. But I shall trust you."

"Me?" Bob stared.

"Yes. I do not want those stones to fall into the hands of my enemies. I do not know when the rising against me will take place. It may be planned for today. I may not live to reach the airstrip this afternoon. Take the stones and do the best you can."

"But look here—I don't understand. What am I to do with them?"

"Arrange somehow to get them safely out of the country."

Ali stared placidly at his perturbed friend.

"You mean, you want me to carry them instead of you?"

"You can put it that way. But I think, really, you will be able to think of some better plan to get them to Europe."

"But look here, Ali, I haven't the first idea how to set about such a thing."

Ali leaned back in his chair. He was smiling in a quietly amused manner.

"You have common sense. And you are honest. And I remember, from the days when you were my fag, that you could always think up some ingenious idea. I will give you the name and address of a man who deals with such matters for me—that is—in case I should not survive. Do not look so worried, Bob. Do the best you can. That is all I ask. I shall not blame you if you fail. It is as Allah wills. For me, it is simple. I do not want those stones taken from my dead body. For the rest—" he shrugged his shoulders. "It is as I have said. All will go as Allah wills."

"You're nuts!"

"No. I am a fatalist, that is all."

"But look here, Ali. You said just now I was honest. But three quarters of a million. Don't you think that might sap any man's honesty?"

Ali Yusuf looked at his friend with affection.

"Strangely enough," he said, "I have no doubt on that score."

CHAPTER II

THE WOMAN ON THE BALCONY

As Bob Rawlinson walked along the echoing marble corridors of the Palace, he had never felt so unhappy in his life. The knowledge that he was carrying three quarters of a million pounds in his trousers pocket caused him acute misery. He felt as though every Palace official he encountered must know the fact. He felt, even, that the knowledge of his precious burden must show in his face. He would have been relieved to learn that his freckled countenance bore exactly its usual expression of cheerful good nature.

The sentries outside presented arms with a clash. Bob walked down the crowded main street of Ramat, his mind still dazed. Where was he going? What was he planning to do? He had no idea. And time was short.

The main street was like most main streets in the Middle East. It was a mixture of squalor and magnificence. Banks reared their vast newly built magnificence. Innumerable small shops presented a collection of cheap plastic goods. Babies' bootees and cheap cigarette lighters were displayed in unlikely juxtaposition. There were sewing machines, and spare parts for cars. Pharmacies displayed flyblown proprietary medicines, and large notices of penicillin in every form and antibiotics galore. In very few of the shops was there anything that you could normally want to buy, except possibly the latest Swiss watches, hundreds of which were displayed crowded into a tiny window. The assortment was so great that even there one would have shrunk from purchase, dazzled by sheer mass.

Bob, still walking in a kind of stupor, jostled by figures in native or European dress, pulled himself together and asked himself again where the hell he was going.

He turned into a native café and ordered lemon tea. As he sipped it, he began, slowly, to come to. The atmosphere of the café was soothing. At a table opposite him an elderly Arab was peacefully clicking through a string of amber beads. Behind him two men played trictrac. It was a good place to sit and think.

And he'd got to think. Jewels worth three quarters of a million had been handed to him, and it was up to him to devise some plan of getting them out of the country. No time to lose, either. At any minute the balloon might go up.

Ali was crazy, of course. Tossing three quarters of a million light-heartedly to a friend in that way. And then sitting back quietly himself and leaving everything to Allah. Bob had not got that recourse. Bob's God expected his servants to decide on and perform their own actions to the best of the ability their God had given them.

What the hell was he going to do with those damned stones?

He thought of the Embassy. No, he couldn't involve the Embassy. The Embassy would almost certainly refuse to be involved.

What he needed was some person, some perfectly ordinary person, who was leaving the country in some perfectly ordinary way. A businessman, or a tourist would be best. Someone with no political connections whose baggage would, at most, be subjected to a superficial search or more probably no search at all. There was, of course, the other end to be considered. Sensation at London Air Port. Attempt to smuggle in jewels worth three quarters of a million. And so on and so on. One would have to risk that.

Somebody ordinary—a bona fide traveller. And suddenly Bob kicked himself for a fool. Joan, of course. His sister Joan Sutcliffe. Joan had been out here for two months with her daughter Jennifer who after a bad bout of pneumonia had been ordered sunshine and a dry climate. They were going back by "long sea" in four or five days.

Joan was the ideal person. What was it Ali had said about women and jewels? Bob smiled to himself. Good old Joan! *She* wouldn't lose her head over jewels. Trust her to keep her feet on the earth. Yes—he could trust Joan.

Wait a minute, though . . . could he trust Joan? Her honesty, yes. But her discretion? Regretfully Bob shook his head. Joan would talk, would not be able to help talking. Even worse, she would hint. "I'm taking home something very important. I mustn't say a word to anyone. It's really rather exciting . . ."

Joan had never been able to keep a thing to herself though she was always very incensed if one told her so. Joan, then, mustn't know what she was taking. It would be safer for her that way. He'd make the stones up into a parcel, an innocent-looking parcel. Tell her some story. A present for someone? A commission? He'd think of something . . .

Bob glanced at his watch and rose to his feet. Time was getting on.

He strode along the street oblivious of the midday heat. Everything seemed so normal. There was nothing to show on the surface. Only in the Palace was one conscious of the banked-down fires, of the spying, the whispers. The Army—it all depended on the Army. Who was loyal? Who was disloyal? A *coup d'état* would certainly be attempted. Would it succeed or fail?

Bob frowned as he turned into Ramat's leading hotel. It was modestly called the Ritz Savoy and had a grand modernistic façade. It had opened with a flourish three years ago with a Swiss manager, a Viennese chef, and an Italian maître d'hôtel. Everything had been wonderful. The Viennese chef had gone first, then the Swiss manager. Now the Italian head waiter had gone too. The food was still ambitious, but bad, the service abominable and a good deal of the expensive plumbing had gone wrong.

The clerk behind the desk knew Bob well and beamed at him.

"Good morning, Squadron Leader. You want your sister? She has gone for a picnic with the little girl."

"A picnic?" Bob was taken aback—of all the silly times to go for a picnic.

"With Mr. and Mrs. Hurst from the oil company," said the clerk informatively. Everyone always knew everything. "They have gone to the Kalat Diwa dam."

Bob swore under his breath. Joan wouldn't be home for hours.

"I'll go up to her room," he said and held out his hand for the key which the clerk gave him.

He unlocked the door and went in. The room, a large double-bedded one, was in its usual confusion. Joan Sutcliffe was not a tidy woman. Golf clubs lay across a chair, tennis racquets had been flung on the bed. Clothing lay about, the table was littered with rolls of films, postcards, paperback books and an assortment of native curios from the Souk, mostly made in Birmingham and Japan.

Bob looked round him, at the suitcases and the zip bags. He was faced with a problem. He wouldn't be able to see Joan before flying Ali out. There wouldn't be time to get to the dam and back. He could parcel up the stuff and leave it with a note—but almost immediately he shook his head. He knew quite well that he was nearly always followed. He'd probably been followed from the Palace to the café and from the café here. He hadn't spotted anyone—but he knew that they were good at the job. There was nothing suspicious in his coming to the hotel to see his sister—but if he left a parcel and a note, the note would be read and the parcel opened.

Time . . . time. . . . He'd no time . . .

Three quarters of a million in precious stones in his trousers pocket.

He looked round the room.

Then, with a grin, he fished out from his pocket the little tool kit he always carried. His niece Jennifer had some modeling clay, he noted, that would help.

He worked quickly and skilfully. Once he looked up, suspicious, his eyes going to the open window. No, there was no balcony outside this room. It was just his nerves that had made him feel that someone was watching him.

He finished his task and nodded in approval. Nobody would notice what he had done—he felt sure of that. Neither Joan nor anyone else. Certainly not Jennifer, a self-centered child, who never saw or noticed anything outside herself.

He swept up all evidences of his toil and put them into his pocket. Then he hesitated, looking round.

He drew Mrs. Sutcliffe's writing pad toward him and sat frowning. He must leave a note for Joan.

But what could he say? It must be something that Joan would understand—but which would mean nothing to anyone who read the note.

And really that was impossible! In the kind of thriller that Bob liked reading to fill up his spare moments, you left a kind of cryptogram which was always successfully puzzled out by someone. But he couldn't even begin to think of a cryptogram—and in any case Joan was the sort of common-sense person who would need the i's dotted and the t's crossed before she noticed anything at all.

Then his brow cleared. There was another way of doing it. Divert attention away from Joan—leave an ordinary everyday note. Then leave a message with someone else to be given to Joan in England.

He wrote rapidly:

Dear Joan,

Dropped in to ask if you'd care to play a round of golf this evening but if you've been up to the dam, you'll probably be dead to the world. What about tomorrow? Five o'clock at the Club.

Yours,
Bob

A casual sort of message to leave for a sister that he might never see again—but in some ways the more casual the better. Joan mustn't be involved in any funny business, mustn't even know that there was any funny business. Joan could not dissimulate. Her protection would be the fact that she clearly knew nothing.

And the note would accomplish a dual purpose. It would seem that he, Bob, had no plan for departure himself.

He thought for a minute or two, then he crossed to the telephone and gave the number of the British Embassy. Presently he was connected with Edmundson, the third secretary, a friend of his.

"John? Bob Rawlinson here. Can you meet me somewhere when you get off? Make it a bit earlier than that? You've got to, old boy. It's important. Well, actually, it's a girl . . . ." He gave an embarrassed cough. "She's wonderful, quite wonderful. Out of this world. Only it's a bit tricky."

Edmundson's voice, sounding slightly stuffed shirt and disapproving, said, "Really, Bob, you and your girls. All right, 2 o'clock do you?" and rang off. Bob heard the little echoing click as whoever had been listening in, replaced the receiver.

Good old Edmundson. Since all telephones in Ramat had been tapped, Bob and John Edmundson had worked out a little code of their own. A wonderful girl who was "out of this world" meant something urgent and important.

Edmundson would pick him up in his car outside the new Merchants Bank at 2 o'clock and he'd tell Edmundson of the hiding place. Tell him that Joan didn't know about it but that, if anything happened to him, it was important. Going by the long sea route Joan and Jennifer wouldn't be back in England for six weeks. By that time the Revolution would almost certainly have happened and either been successful or have been put down. Ali Yusuf might be in Europe, or he and Bob might both be dead. He would tell Edmundson enough, but not too much.

Bob took a last look round the room. It looked exactly the same, peaceful, untidy, domestic. The only thing added was his harmless note to Joan. He propped it up on the table and went out. There was no one in the long corridor.

ii

The woman in the room next to that occupied by Joan Sutcliffe stepped back from the balcony. There was a mirror in her hand.

She had gone out on the balcony originally to examine more closely a single hair that had the audacity to spring up on her chin. She dealt with it with tweezers, then subjected her face to a minute scrutiny in the clear sunlight.

It was then, as she relaxed, that she saw something else. The angle at which she was holding her mirror was such that it reflected the mirror of the hanging wardrobe in the room next to hers, and in that mirror she saw a man doing something very curious.

So curious and unexpected that she stood there motionless, watching. He could not see her from where he sat at the table, and she could only see him by means of the double reflection.

If he had turned his head, he might have caught sight of her mirror in the wardrobe mirror, but he was too absorbed in what he was doing to look behind him.

Once, it was true, he did look up suddenly toward the window, but since there was nothing to see there, he lowered his head again.

The woman watched him while he finished what he was doing. After a moment's pause he wrote a note which he propped up on the table. Then he moved out of her line of vision but she could just hear enough to realize that he was making a telephone call. She couldn't quite catch what was said, but it sounded light-hearted—casual. Then she heard the door close.

The woman waited a few minutes. Then she opened her door. At the far end of the passage an Arab was flicking idly, with a feather duster. He turned the corner, out of sight.

The woman slipped quickly to the door of the next room. It was locked, but she had expected that. The hairpin she had with her and the blade of a small knife did the job quickly and expertly.

She went in, pushing the door to behind her. She picked up the note. The flap had only been stuck down lightly and opened easily. She read the note, frowning. There was no explanation there.

She sealed it up, put it back, and walked across the room.

There, with her hand outstretched, she was disturbed by voices through the window from the terrace below.

One was a voice that she knew to be the occupier of the room in which she was standing. A decided, didactic voice, fully assured of itself.

She darted to the window.

Below on the terrace, Joan Sutcliffe, accompanied by her daughter Jennifer, a pale solid child of fifteen, was telling the world and a tall unhappy-looking Englishman from the British Consulate just what she thought of the arrangements he had come to make.

"But it's absurd! I never heard such nonsense. Everything's perfectly quiet here and everyone quite pleasant. I think it's all a lot of panicky fuss."

"We hope so, Mrs. Sutcliffe, we certainly hope so. But H.E. feels that the responsibility is such . . ."

Mrs. Sutcliffe cut him short. She did not propose to consider the responsibility of Ambassadors.

"We've a lot of baggage, you know. We were going home by long sea—next Wednesday. The sea voyage will be good for Jennifer. The doctor said so. I really must absolutely decline to alter all my arrangements and be flown to England in this silly flurry."

The unhappy-looking man said encouragingly that Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter could be flown, not to England, but to Aden and catch their boat there.

"With our baggage?"

"Yes, yes, that can be arranged. I've got a car waiting with a station wagon. We can load everything right away."

"Oh, well." Mrs. Sutcliffe capitulated. "I suppose we'd better pack."

"At once, if you don't mind."

The woman in the bedroom drew back hurriedly. She took a quick glance at the address on a luggage label on one of the suitcases. Then she slipped out of the room and back into her own just as Mrs. Sutcliffe turned the corner of the corridor.

The clerk from the office was running after her.

"Your brother, the Squadron Leader, has been here, Mrs. Sutcliffe. He went up to your room. But I think that he has left again. You must just have missed him."

"How tiresome," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "Thank you," she said to the clerk and went on to Jennifer, "I suppose Bob's fussing too. I can't see any sign of disturbance myself in the streets. This door's unlocked. How careless these people are."

"Perhaps it was Uncle Bob," said Jennifer.

"I wish I hadn't missed him. Oh, there's a note." She tore it open.

"At any rate Bob isn't fussing," she said triumphantly. "He obviously doesn't know a thing about all this. Diplomatic wind up, that's all it is. How I hate trying to pack in the heat of the day. This room's like an oven. Come on, Jennifer, get your things out of the chest of drawers and the wardrobe. We must just shove everything in anyhow. We can repack later."

"I've never been in a Revolution," said Jennifer thoughtfully.

"I don't expect you'll be in one this time," said her mother sharply. "It will be just as I say. Nothing will happen."

Jennifer looked disappointed.

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCING MR. ROBINSON

IT WAS SOME six weeks later that a young man tapped discreetly on the door of a room in Bloomsbury and was told to come in.

It was a small room. Behind a desk sat a fat middle-aged man slumped in a chair. He was wearing a crumpled suit, the front of which was smothered in cigar ash. The windows were closed and the atmosphere was almost unbearable.

"Well?" said the fat man testily, and speaking with half closed eyes. "What is it now, eh?"

It was said of Colonel Pikeaway that his eyes were always just closing in sleep, or just opening after sleep. It was also said that his name was not Pikeaway and that he was not a Colonel. But some people will say anything!

"Edmundson, from the Foreign Office is here, sir."

"Oh," said Colonel Pikeaway.

He blinked, appeared to be going to sleep again and muttered:

"Third secretary at our Embassy in Ramat at the time of the Revolution. Right?"

"That's right, sir."

"I suppose, then, I'd better see him," said Colonel Pikeaway without any marked relish. He pulled himself into a more upright position and brushed off a little of the ash from his paunch.

Mr. Edmundson was a tall fair young man, very correctly dressed with manners to match, and a general air of quiet disapproval.

"Colonel Pikeaway? I'm John Edmundson. They said you—er—might want to see me."

"Did they? Well, they should know," said Colonel Pikeaway. "Siddown," he added.

His eyes began to close again, but before they did so, he spoke:

"You were in Ramat at the time of the Revolution?"

"Yes, I was. A nasty business."

"I suppose it would be. You were a friend of Bob Rawlinson's, weren't you?"

"I know him fairly well, yes."

"Wrong tense," said Colonel Pikeaway. "He's dead."

"Yes, sir, I know. But I wasn't sure . . ." He paused.

"You don't have to take pains to be discreet here," said Colonel Pikeaway. "We know everything here. Or if we don't, we pretend we do. Rawlinson flew Ali Yusuf out of Ramat on the day of the Revolution. Plane wasn't heard of since. Could have landed in some inaccessible place, or could have crashed. Wreckage of a plane has been found in the Arolez mountains. Two bodies. News will be released to the press tomorrow. Right?"

Edmundson admitted that it was quite right.

"We know all about things here," said Colonel Pikeaway. "That's what we're for. Plane flew into the mountain. Could have been weather conditions. Some reason to believe it was sabotage. Delayed action bomb. We haven't got the full reports yet. The plane crashed in a pretty inaccessible place. There was a reward offered for finding it, but these things take a long time to filter through. Then we had to fly out experts to make an examination. All the red tape, of course. Applications to a foreign government, permission from ministers, palm greasing—to say nothing of the local peasantry appropriating anything that might come in useful."

He paused and looked at Edmundson.

"Very sad, the whole thing," said Edmundson. "Prince Ali Yusuf would have made a most enlightened ruler, with firm democratic principles."

"That's what probably did the poor chap in," said Colonel Pikeaway. "But we can't waste time in telling sad stories of the deaths of kings. We've been asked to make certain—inquiries. By interested parties. Parties, that is, to whom Her Majesty's Government is well disposed." He looked hard at the other. "Know what I mean?"

"Well, I have heard something." Edmundson spoke reluctantly.

"You've heard perhaps, that nothing of value was found on the bodies, or among the wreckage, or as far as is known, had been pinched by the locals. Though as to that, you never can tell with peasants. They can clam up as well as the Foreign Office itself. And what else have you heard?"

"Nothing else."

"You haven't heard that perhaps something of value ought to have been found? What did they send you to me for?"

"They said you might want to ask me certain questions," said Edmundson primly.

"If I ask you questions, I shall expect answers," Colonel Pikeaway pointed out.

"Naturally."

"Doesn't seem natural to you, son. Did Bob Rawlinson say anything to you before he flew out of Ramat? He was in Ali's confidence if anyone was. Come now, let's have it. Did he say anything?"

"As to what, sir?"

Colonel Pikeaway stared hard at him and scratched his ear.

"Oh, all right," he grumbled. "Hush up this and don't say that. Overdo it in my opinion! If you don't know what I'm talking about, you don't know, and there it is."

"I think there was something—" Edmundson spoke cautiously and with reluctance. "Something important that Bob might have wanted to tell me."

"Ah," said Colonel Pikeaway, with the air of a man who has at last pulled a cork out of a bottle. "Interesting. Let's have what you know."

"It's very little, sir. Bob and I had a kind of simple code. We'd cottoned on to the fact that all the telephones in Ramat were being tapped. Bob was in the way of hearing things at the Palace, and I sometimes had a bit of useful information to pass on to him. So if one of us rang the other up and mentioned a girl or girls, in a certain way, using the term 'out of this world' for her, it meant something was up!"

"Important information of some kind or other?"

"Yes. Bob rang me up using those terms the day the whole show started. I was to meet him at our usual rendezvous—outside one of the banks. But rioting broke out in that particular quarter and the police closed the road. I couldn't make contact with Bob or he with me. He flew Ali out that same afternoon."

"I see," said Pikeaway. "No idea where he was telephoning from?"

"No. It might have been anywhere."

"Pity." He paused and then threw out casually:

"Do you know Mrs. Sutcliffe?"

"You mean Bob Rawlinson's sister? I met her out there, of course. She was there with a schoolgirl daughter. I don't know her well."

"Were she and Bob Rawlinson very close?"

Edmundson considered.

"No, I shouldn't say so. She was a good deal older than he was, and rather much of the elder sister. And he didn't much like his brother-in-law —always referred to him as a pompous ass."

"So he is! One of our prominent industrialists—and how pompous can they get! So you don't think it likely that Bob Rawlinson would have confided an important secret to his sister?"

"It's difficult to say—but no, I shouldn't think so."

"I shouldn't either," said Colonel Pikeaway.

He sighed. "Well, there we are. Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter are on their way home by the long sea route. Dock at Tilbury on the 'Eastern Queen' tomorrow."

He was silent for a moment or two, while his eyes made a thoughtful survey of the young man opposite him. Then, as though having come to a decision, he held out his hand and spoke briskly.

"Very good of you to come."

"I'm only sorry I've been of such little use. You're sure that there's nothing I can do?"

"No. No. I'm afraid not."

John Edmundson went out.

The discreet young man came back.

"Thought I might have sent him to Tilbury to break the news to the sister," said Pikeaway. "Friend of her brother's—all that. But I decided against it. Inelastic type. That's the F.O. training. Not an opportunist. I'll send what's his name."

"Derek?"

"That's right," Colonel Pikeaway nodded approval. "Getting to know what I mean quite well, ain't you?"

"I try my best, sir."

"Trying's not enough. You have to succeed. Send me along Ronnie first. I've got an assignment for him."

ii

Colonel Pikeaway was apparently just going off to sleep again when the young man called Ronnie entered the room. He was tall, dark, muscular, and had a gay and rather impertinent manner.

Colonel Pikeaway looked at him for a moment or two and then grinned.

"How'd you like to penetrate into a girls' school?" he asked.

"A girls' school?" The young man lifted his eyebrows. "That will be something new! What are they up to? Making bombs in the chemistry class?"

"Nothing of that kind. Very superior high-class school. Meadowbank."

"Meadowbank!" the young man whistled. "I can't believe it!"

"Hold your impertinent tongue and listen to me. Princess Shaista, first cousin and only near relative of the late Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat, goes there this next term. She's been at school in Switzerland up to now."

"What do I do? Abduct her?"

"Certainly not. I think it possible she may become a focus of interest in the near future. I want you to keep an eye on developments. I'll have to leave it vague. I don't know what or who may turn up, but if any of our more unlikable friends seem to be interested, report it. A watching brief, that's what you've got."

The young man nodded.

"And how do I get in to watch? Shall I be the drawing master?"

"The visiting staff is all female." Colonel Pikeaway looked at him in a considering manner. "I think I'll have to make you a gardener."

"A gardener?"

"Yes. I'm right in thinking you know something about gardening?"

"Yes, indeed. I ran a column on 'Your Garden' in the Sunday *Mail* for a year in my younger days."

"Tush!" said Colonel Pikeaway. "That's nothing! I could do a column on gardening myself without knowing a thing about it—just crib from a few luridly illustrated nurserymen's catalogues and a gardening encyclopedia. I know all the patter. '*Why not break away from tradition and sound a really tropical note in your border this year? Lovely Amabellis Gossiporia, and some of the wonderful new Chinese hybrids of Sinensis Maka foolia. Try the rich blushing beauty of a clump of Sinistra Hopaless, not very hardy but they should be all right against a west wall.*' " He broke off and grinned. "Nothing to it! The fools buy the things and early frost sets in and kills them and they wish they'd stuck to wallflowers and forget-me-nots! No, my boy, I mean the real stuff. Spit on your hands and use the spade, be well acquainted with the compost heap, mulch diligently, use the Dutch hoe and every other kind of hoe, trench really deep for your sweet peas—and all the rest of the beastly business. Can you do it?"

"All these things I have done from my youth upward!"

"Of course you have. I know your mother. Well, that's settled."

"Is there a job going as gardener at Meadowbank?"

"Sure to be," said Colonel Pikeaway. "Every garden in England is short staffed. I'll write you some nice testimonials. You'll see, they'll simply jump at you. No time to waste, summer term begins on the 29th."

"I garden and I keep my eyes open, is that right?"

"That's it, and if any oversexed teenagers make passes at you, Heaven help you if you respond. I don't want you thrown out on your ear too soon."

He drew a sheet of paper toward him. "What do you fancy as a name?"

"Adam would seem appropriate."

"Last name?"

"How about Eden?"

"I'm not sure I like the way your mind is running. Adam Goodman will do very nicely. Go and work out your past history with Jenson and then get cracking." He looked at his watch. "I've no more time for you. I don't want to keep Robinson waiting. He ought to be here by now."

Adam (to give him his new name) stopped as he was moving to the door.

"Robinson?" he asked curiously. "Is *he* coming?"

"I said so." A buzzer went on the desk. "There he is now. Always punctual, Mr. Robinson."

"Tell me," said Adam curiously. "Who is he really? What's his real name?"

"His name," said Colonel Pikeaway, "is Mr. Robinson. That's all I know, and that's all anybody knows."

iii

The man who came into the room did not look as though his name was, or could ever have been, Robinson. It might have been Demetrius, or Isaacstein, or Perenna—though not one or the other in particular. He was not definitely Jewish, nor definitely Greek nor Portuguese nor Spanish, nor South American. What did seem highly unlikely was that he was an Englishman called Robinson. He was fat and well dressed, with a yellow face, melancholy dark eyes, a broad forehead, and a generous mouth that displayed rather overlarge very white teeth. His hands were well shaped and beautifully kept. His voice was English with no trace of accent.

He and Colonel Pikeaway greeted each other rather in the manner of two reigning monarchs. Politenesses were exchanged.

Then, as Mr. Robinson accepted a cigar, Colonel Pikeaway said:

"It is very good of you to offer to help us."

Mr. Robinson lit his cigar, savoured it appreciatively, and finally spoke.

"My dear fellow. I just thought—— I hear things, you know. I know a lot of people, and they tell me things. I don't know why."

Colonel Pikeaway did not comment on the reason why.

He said:

"I gather you've heard that Prince Ali Yusuf's plane has been found?"

"Wednesday of last week," said Mr. Robinson. "Young Rawlinson was the pilot. A tricky flight. But the crash wasn't due to any error on Rawlinson's part. The plane had been tampered with—by a certain Achmed—senior mechanic. Completely trustworthy—or so Rawlinson thought. But he wasn't. He's got a very lucrative job with the new regime now."

"So it was sabotage! We didn't know for sure. It's a sad story."

"Yes. That poor young man—Ali Yusuf, I mean—was ill equipped to cope with corruption and treachery. His public school education was unwise—or at least that is my view. But we do not concern ourselves with him now, do we? He is yesterday's news. Nothing is so dead as a dead king. We are concerned, you in your way, I in mine, with what dead kings leave behind them."

"Which is?"

Mr. Robinson shrugged his shoulders.

"A substantial bank balance in Geneva, a modest balance in London, considerable assets in his own country now taken over by the glorious new regime (and a little bad feeling as to how the spoils have been divided, or so I hear!), and finally a small personal item."

"Small?"

"These things are relative. Anyway, small in bulk. Handy to carry upon the person."

"They weren't on Ali Yusuf's person, as far as we know."

"No. Because he had handed them over to young Rawlinson."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Pikeaway sharply.

"Well, one is never sure," said Mr. Robinson apologetically. "In a Palace there is so much gossip. It cannot all be true. But there was a very strong rumour to that effect."

"They weren't on young Rawlinson's person, either."

"In that case," said Mr. Robinson, "it seems as though they must have been got out of the country by some other means."

"What other means? Have you any idea?"

"Rawlinson went to a café in the town after he had received the jewels. He was not seen to speak to anyone or approach anyone while he was there. Then he went to the Ritz Savoy Hotel where his sister was staying. He went up to her room and was there for about twenty minutes. She herself was out. He then left the hotel and went to the Merchants Bank in Victory Square where he cashed a check. When he came out of the bank a disturbance was beginning. Students rioting about something. It was some time before the Square was cleared. Rawlinson then went straight to the airstrip where, in company with Sergeant Achmed, he went over the plane.

"Ali Yusuf drove out to see the new road construction, stopped his car at the airstrip, joined Rawlinson and expressed a desire to take a short flight and see the dam and the new highway construction from the air. They took off and did not return."

"And your deductions from that?"

"My dear fellow, the same as yours. Why did Bob Rawlinson spend twenty minutes in his sister's room when she was out and he had been told that she was not likely to return until evening? He left her a note which would have taken him at most three minutes to scribble. What did he do for the rest of the time?"

"You are suggesting that he concealed the jewels in some appropriate place among his sister's belongings?"

"It seems indicated, does it not? Mrs. Sutcliffe was evacuated that same day with other British subjects. She was flown to Aden with her daughter. She arrives at Tilbury, I believe, tomorrow."

Pikeaway nodded.

"Look after her," said Mr. Robinson.

"We're going to look after her," said Pikeaway. "That's all arranged."

"If she has the jewels, she will be in danger." He closed his eyes. "I so much dislike violence."

"You think there is likely to be violence?"

"There are people interested. Various undesirable people—if you understand me."

"I understand you," said Pikeaway grimly.

"And they will, of course, all double-cross each other." Mr. Robinson shook his head. "So confusing."

Colonel Pikeaway asked delicately: "Have you yourself any—er—special interest in the matter?"

"I represent a certain group of interests," said Mr. Robinson. His voice was faintly reproachful. "Some of the stones in question were supplied by my syndicate to his late Highness—at a very fair and reasonable price. The group of people I represent who are interested in the recovery of the stones would, I may venture to say, have had the approval of the late owner. I shouldn't like to say more. These matters are so delicate."

"But you are definitely on the side of the angels," Colonel Pikeaway smiled.

"Ah, angels! Angels—yes." He paused. "Do you happen to know who occupied the rooms in the Ritz Savoy Hotel on either side of the room occupied by Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter?"

Colonel Pikeaway looked vague.

"Let me see now—I believe I do. On the left-hand side was Señora Angelica da Toredo—a Spanish—er—dancer appearing at the local cabaret. Perhaps not strictly Spanish and perhaps not a very good dancer. But popular with the clientele. On the other side was one of a group of school teachers, I understand."

Mr. Robinson beamed approvingly.

"You are always the same. I come to tell you things, but nearly always you know them already."

"No, no." Colonel Pikeaway made a polite disclaimer.

"Between us," said Mr. Robinson, "we know a good deal."

Their eyes met.

"I hope," Mr. Robinson said, rising, "that we know enough."

CHAPTER IV

RETURN OF A TRAVELLER

"REALLY!" SAID MRS. SUTCLIFFE, in an annoyed voice, as she looked out of her hotel window, "I don't see why it always has to rain when one comes back to England. It makes it all seem so depressing."

"I think it's lovely to be back," said Jennifer. "Hearing everyone talk English in the streets! And we'll be able to have a really good tea presently. Bread and butter and jam and proper cakes."

"I wish you weren't so insular, darling," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "What's the good of my taking you abroad all the way to the Persian Gulf if you're going to say you'd rather have stayed at home?"

"I don't mind going abroad just for a month or two," said Jennifer. "All I said was I'm glad to be back."

"Now do get out of the way, dear, and let me make sure that they've brought up all the luggage. Really, I do feel—I've felt ever since the war that people have got very dishonest nowadays. I'm sure if I hadn't kept an eye on things that man would have gone off with my green zip bag at Tilbury. And there was another man hanging about near the luggage. I saw him afterward on the train. I believe, you know, that these sneak-thieves meet the boats and if the people are flustered or seasick they go off with some of the suitcases."

"Oh, you're always thinking things like that, Mother," said Jennifer. "You think everybody you meet's dishonest."

"Most of them are," said Mrs. Sutcliffe grimly.

"Not English people," said the loyal Jennifer.

"That's worse," said her mother. "One doesn't expect anything else from Arabs and foreigners, but in England one's off one's guard and that makes it easier for dishonest people. Now do let me count. That's the big green suitcase and the black one, and the two small brown and the zip bag and the golf clubs and the racquets and the hold-all and the canvas suitcase—and where's the green bag? Oh, there it is. And that local tin trunk we bought to put the extra things in—yes, one, two, three, four, five, six—yes, that's right. All fourteen things are here."

"Can't we have some tea now?" said Jennifer.

"Tea? It's only three o'clock."

"I'm awfully hungry."

"All right, all right. Can you go down by yourself and order it? I really feel I must have a rest, and then I'll just unpack the things we'll need for tonight. It's too bad your father couldn't have met us. Why he had to have an important directors' meeting in Newcastle-on-Tyne today I simply cannot imagine. You'd think his wife and daughter would come first. Especially as he hadn't seen us for three months. Are you sure you can manage by yourself?"

"Good gracious, Mummy," said Jennifer, "what age do you think I am? Can I have some money, please? I haven't got any English money."

She accepted the ten-shilling note her mother handed to her, and went out scornfully.

The telephone rang by the bed. Mrs. Sutcliffe went to it and picked up the receiver.

"Hullo . . . yes . . . yes, Mrs. Sutcliffe speaking . . ."

There was a knock on the door. Mrs. Sutcliffe said, "Just one moment" to the receiver, laid it down and went over to the door. A young man in dark blue overalls was standing there with a small kit of tools.

"Electrician," he said briskly. "The lights in this suite aren't satisfactory. I've been sent up to see to them."

"Oh—all right . . ."

She drew back. The electrician entered.

"Bathroom?"

"Through there—beyond the other bedroom."

She went back to the telephone.

"I'm so sorry . . . What were you saying?"

"My name is Derek O'Connor. Perhaps I might come up to your suite, Mrs. Sutcliffe. It's about your brother."

"Bob? Is there—news of him?"

"I'm afraid so—yes."

"Oh . . . Oh, I see . . . Yes, come up. It's on the third floor, 310."

She sat down on the bed. She already knew what the news must be.

Presently there was a knock on the door and she opened it to admit a young man who shook hands in a suitably subdued manner.

"Are you from the Foreign Office?"

"My name's Derek O'Connor. My chief sent me round as there didn't seem to be anybody else who could break it to you."

"Please tell me," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "He's killed. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it, Mrs. Sutcliffe. He was flying Prince Ali Yusuf out from Ramat and they crashed in the mountains."

"Why haven't I heard—why didn't someone wireless it to the boat?"

"There was no definite news until a few days ago. It was known that the plane was missing, that was all. But under the circumstances there might still have been hope. But now the wreck of the plane has been found. I am sure you will be glad to know that death was instantaneous."

"The Prince was killed as well?"

"Yes."

"I'm not at all surprised," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. Her voice shook a little but she had full command of herself. "I knew Bob would die young. He was always reckless, you know—always flying new planes, trying new stunts. I've hardly seen anything of him for the last four years. Oh, well, one can't change people, can one?"

"No," said her visitor, "I'm afraid not."

"Henry always said he'd smash himself up sooner or later," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. She seemed to derive a kind of melancholy satisfaction from the accuracy of her husband's prophecy. A tear rolled down her cheek and she looked for her handkerchief. "It's been a shock," she said.

"I know—I'm awfully sorry."

"Bob couldn't run away, of course," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "I mean, he'd taken on the job of being the Prince's pilot. I wouldn't have wanted him to throw in his hand. And he was a good flyer too. I'm sure if he ran into a mountain it wasn't his fault."

"No," said O'Connor, "it certainly wasn't his fault. The only hope of getting the Prince out was to fly in no matter what conditions. It was a dangerous flight to undertake and it went wrong."

Mrs. Sutcliffe nodded.

"I quite understand," she said. "Thank you for coming to tell me."

"There's something more," said O'Connor, "something I've got to ask you. Did your brother entrust anything to you to take back to England?"

"Entrust something to me?" said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "What do you mean?"

"Did he give you any—package—any small parcel to bring back and deliver to anyone in England?"

She shook her head wonderingly. "No. Why should you think he did?"

"There was a rather important package which we think your brother may have given to someone to bring home. He called on you at your hotel that day—the day of the Revolution, I mean."

"I know. He left a note. But there was nothing in that—just some silly thing about playing tennis or golf the next day. I suppose when he wrote that note, he couldn't have known that he'd have to fly the Prince out that very afternoon."

"That was all it said?"

"The note? Yes."

"Have you kept it, Mrs. Sutcliffe?"

"Kept the note he left? No, of course I haven't. It was quite trivial. I tore it up and threw it away. Why should I keep it?"

"No reason," said O'Connor. "I just wondered."

"Wondered what?" said Mrs. Sutcliffe crossly.

"Whether there might have been some—other message concealed in it. After all—" he smiled, "there is such a thing as invisible ink, you know."

"Invisible ink!" said Mrs. Sutcliffe, with a great deal of distaste. "Do you mean the sort of thing they use in spy stories?"

"Well, I'm afraid I do mean just that," said O'Connor, rather apologetically.

"How idiotic," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "I'm sure Bob would never use anything like invisible ink. Why should he? He was a dear, matter-of-fact sensible person." A tear dripped down her cheek again. "Oh, dear, where is my bag? I must have a handkerchief. Perhaps I left it in the other room."

"I'll get it for you," said O'Connor.

He went through the communicating door and stopped as a young man in overalls who was bending over a suitcase straightened up to face him, looking rather startled.

"Electrician," said the young man hurriedly. "Something wrong with the lights here."

O'Connor flicked a switch.

"They seem all right to me," he said pleasantly.

"Must have given me the wrong room number," said the electrician.

He gathered up his tool bag and slipped out quickly through the door to the corridor.

O'Connor frowned, picked up Mrs. Sutcliffe's bag from the dressing table and took it back to her.

"Excuse me," he said, and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Room 310 here. Have you just sent up an electrician to see to the lights in this suite? Yes . . . yes, I'll hang on."

He waited.

"No? No, I thought you hadn't. No, there's nothing wrong."

He replaced the receiver and turned to Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"There's nothing wrong with any of the lights here," he said. "And the office didn't send up an electrician."

"Then what was that man doing? Was he a thief?"

"He may have been."

Mrs. Sutcliffe looked hurriedly in her bag. "He hasn't taken anything out of my bag. The money is all right."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Sutcliffe, absolutely sure that your brother didn't give you anything to take home, to pack among your belongings?"

"I'm absolutely sure," said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"Or your daughter—you have a daughter, haven't you?"

"Yes. She's downstairs having tea. Oh, I dread having to tell her about Bob. Maybe it would be better to wait until we get home . . ."

"Could your brother have given anything to her?"

"No, I'm sure he couldn't."

"There's another possibility," said O'Connor, "he might have hidden something in your baggage among your belongings that day when he was waiting for you in your room."

"But why should Bob do such a thing? It sounds absolutely absurd."

"It's not quite so absurd as it sounds. It seems possible that Prince Ali Yusuf gave your brother something to keep for him and that your brother thought it would be safer among your possessions than if he kept it himself."

"Sounds very unlikely to me," said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"I wonder now, would you mind if we searched?"

"Searched through my luggage, do you mean? Unpack?" Mrs. Sutcliffe's voice rose with a wail on that word.

"I know," said O'Connor, "it's a terrible thing to ask you. But it might be very important. I could help you, you know," he said persuasively. "I often used to pack for my mother. She said I was quite a good packer."

He exerted all the charm which was one of his assets to Colonel Pikeaway.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Sutcliffe yielding, "I suppose—if you say so—if, I mean, it's really important—"

"It might be very important," said Derek O'Connor. "Well, now," he smiled at her. "Suppose we begin."

ii

Three quarters of an hour later Jennifer returned from her tea. She looked round the room and gave a gasp of surprise.

"Mummy, what have you been doing?"

"We've been unpacking," said Mrs. Sutcliffe crossly. "Now we're packing things up again. This is Mr. O'Connor. My daughter Jennifer."

"But why are you packing and unpacking?"

"Don't ask me why," snapped her mother. "There seems to be some idea that your Uncle Bob put something in my luggage to bring home. He didn't give you anything, I suppose, Jennifer?"

"Uncle Bob give me anything to bring back? No. Have you been unpacking my things too?"

"We've unpacked everything," said Derek O'Connor cheerfully, "and we haven't found a thing and now we're packing them up again. I think you ought to have a drink of tea or something, Mrs. Sutcliffe. Can I order you something? A brandy and soda perhaps?" He went to the telephone.

"I wouldn't mind a good cup of tea," said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"I had a smashing tea," said Jennifer. "Bread and butter and sandwiches and cake and then the waiter brought me more sandwiches because I asked him if he'd mind and he said he didn't. It was lovely."

O'Connor ordered the tea, then he finished packing up Mrs. Sutcliffe's belongings again with a neatness and a dexterity which forced her unwilling admiration.

"Your mother seems to have trained you to pack very well," she said.

"Oh, I've all sorts of handy accomplishments," said O'Connor smiling.

His mother was long since dead, and his skill in packing and unpacking had been acquired solely in the service of Colonel Pikeaway.

"There's just one thing more, Mrs. Sutcliffe. I'd like you to be very careful of yourself."

"Careful of myself? In what way?"

"Well," O'Connor left it vague. "Revolutions are tricky things. There are a lot of ramifications. Are you staying in London long?"

"We're going down to the country tomorrow. My husband will be driving us down."

"That's all right then. But—don't take any chances. If anything in the least out of the ordinary happens, ring 999 straightaway."

"Ooh!" said Jennifer, in high delight. "Dial 999. I've always wanted to."

"Don't be silly, Jennifer," said her mother.

iii

Extract from account in a local paper.

> *A man appeared before the Magistrate's court yesterday charged with breaking into the residence of Mr. Henry Sutcliffe with intent to steal. Mrs. Sutcliffe's bedroom was ransacked and left in wild confusion while the members of the family were at Church on Sunday morning. The kitchen staff who were preparing the midday meal,*

> *heard nothing. Police arrested the man as he was making his escape from the house. Something had evidently alarmed him and he had fled without taking anything.*
>
> *Giving his name as Andrew Ball of no fixed abode, he pleaded guilty. He said he had been out of work and was looking for money. Mrs. Sutcliffe's jewellery, apart from a few pieces which she was wearing, is kept at her bank.*

"I told you to have the lock of that drawing-room French window seen to," was the comment of Mr. Sutcliffe in the family circle.

"My dear Henry," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, "you don't seem to realize that I have been abroad for the last three months. And anyway, I'm sure I've read somewhere that if burglars want to get in they always can."

She added wistfully, as she glanced again at the local paper:

"How beautifully grand 'Kitchen staff' sounds. So different from what it really is, old Mrs. Ellis who is quite deaf and can hardly stand up and that half-witted daughter of the Bardwells who comes in to help on Sunday mornings."

"What I don't see," said Jennifer, "is how the police found out the house was being burgled and got here in time to catch him."

"It seems extraordinary that he didn't take anything," commented her mother.

"Are you quite sure about that, Joan?" demanded her husband. "You were a little doubtful at first."

Mrs. Sutcliffe gave an exasperated sigh.

"It's impossible to tell about a thing like that straightaway. The mess in my bedroom—things thrown about everywhere, drawers pulled out and overturned. I had to look through everything before I could be sure—though now I come to think of it, I don't remember seeing my best Jacqmar scarf."

"I'm sorry, Mummy. That was me. It blew overboard in the Mediterranean. I'd borrowed it. I meant to tell you but I forgot."

"Really, Jennifer, how often have I asked you not to borrow things without telling me first?"

"Can I have some more pudding?" said Jennifer, creating a diversion.

"I suppose so. Really, Mrs. Ellis has a wonderfully light hand. It makes it worth while having to shout at her so much. I do hope, though, that they won't think you too greedy at school. Meadowbank isn't quite an ordinary school, remember."

"I don't know that I really want to go to Meadowbank," said Jennifer. "I knew a girl whose cousin had been there, and she said it was awful.

They spent all their time telling you how to get in and out of Rolls Royces, and how to behave if you went to lunch with the Queen."

"That will do, Jennifer," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "You don't appreciate how extremely fortunate you are in being admitted to Meadowbank. Miss Bulstrode doesn't take every girl, I can tell you. It's entirely owing to your father's important position and the influence of your Aunt Rosamond. You are exceedingly lucky. And if," added Mrs. Sutcliffe, "you are ever asked to lunch with the Queen, it will be a good thing for you to know how to behave."

"Oh, well," said Jennifer. "I expect the Queen often has to have people to lunch who don't know how to behave—African chiefs and jockeys and sheiks."

"African chiefs have the most polished manners," said her father, who had recently returned from a short business trip to Ghana.

"So do Arab sheiks," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "Really courtly."

"D'you remember that sheik's feast we went to?" said Jennifer. "And how he picked out the sheep's eye and gave it to you, and Uncle Bob nudged you not to make a fuss and to eat it? I mean, if a sheik did that with roast lamb at Buckingham Palace, it would give the Queen a bit of a jolt, wouldn't it?"

"That will do, Jennifer," said her mother and closed the subject.

iv

When Andrew Ball of no fixed abode had been sentenced to three months for breaking and entering, Derek O'Connor, who had been occupying a modest position at the back of the Magistrate's Court, put through a call to a Museum number.

"Not a thing on the fellow when we picked him up," he said. "We gave him plenty of time too."

"Who was he? Anyone we know?"

"One of the Gecko lot, I think. Small time. They hire him out for this sort of thing. Not much brain but he's said to be thorough."

"And he took his sentence like a lamb?" At the other end of the line Colonel Pikeaway grinned as he spoke.

"Yes. Perfect picture of a stupid fellow lapsed from the straight and narrow path. You'd never connect him with any big-time stuff. That's his value, of course."

"And he didn't find anything," mused Colonel Pikeaway. "And you didn't find anything. It rather looks, doesn't it, as though there isn't anything to find? Our idea that Rawlinson planted these things on his sister seems to have been wrong."

"Other people appear to have the same idea."

"It's a bit obvious really. Maybe we were meant to take the bait."

"Could be. Any other possibilities?"

"Plenty of them. The stuff may still be in Ramat. Hidden somewhere in the Ritz Savoy Hotel, maybe. Or Rawlinson passed it to someone on his way to the airstrip. Or there may be something in that hint of Mr. Robinson's. A woman may have got hold of it. Or it could be that Mrs. Sutcliffe had it all the time unbeknown to herself, and flung it overboard in the Red Sea with something she had no further use for.

"And that," he added thoughtfully, "might be all for the best."

"Oh, come now, it's worth a lot of money, sir."

"Human life is worth a lot, too," said Colonel Pikeaway.

CHAPTER V

LETTERS FROM MEADOWBANK SCHOOL

LETTER FROM Julia Upjohn to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

I've settled in now and am liking it very much. There's a girl who is new this term too called Jennifer and she and I rather do things together. We're both awfully keen on tennis. She's rather good. She has a really smashing serve when it comes off, but it doesn't usually. She says her racquet's got warped from being out in the Persian Gulf. It's very hot out there. She was in all that Revolution that happened. I said wasn't it very exciting, but she said no, they didn't see anything at all. They were taken away to the Embassy or something and missed it.

Miss Bulstrode is rather a lamb, but she's pretty frightening too—or can be. She goes easy on you when you're new. Behind her back everyone calls her The Bull, or Bully. We're taught English literature by Miss Rich, who's terrific. When she gets in a real state her hair comes down. She's got a queer but rather exciting face and when she reads bits of Shakespeare it seems all different and real. She went on at us the other day about Iago, and what he felt—and a lot about jealousy and how it ate into you and you suffered until you went quite mad wanting to hurt the person you loved. It gave us all the shivers—except Jennifer, because nothing upsets her. Miss Rich teaches us geography, too. I always thought it was such a dull subject, but it isn't with Miss Rich. This morning she told us all about the spice trade and why they had to have spices because of things going bad so easily.

I'm starting art with Miss Laurie. She comes twice a week and takes us up to London to see picture galleries as well. We do French with Mademoiselle Blanche. She doesn't keep order very well. Jennifer says French people can't. She doesn't get cross, though, only bored. She says "Enfin, vous m'ennuiez, les enfants!" *Miss Springer is awful. She does gym and P.T. She's got ginger hair and smells when she's hot. Then there's Miss Chadwick (Chaddy)—she's been here since the school started. She teaches mathematics and is rather fussy, but quite nice. And there's Miss Vansittart who teaches history and German. She's a sort of second Miss Bulstrode with the pep left out.*

There are a lot of foreign girls here, two Italians and some Germans, and a rather jolly Swede (she's a Princess or something) and a girl who's half Turkish and half Persian and who says she would have been married to Prince Ali Yusuf who got killed in that aeroplane crash, but Jennifer says that isn't true, that Shaista only says so because she was a kind of cousin, and you're supposed to marry a cousin. But Jennifer says he wasn't going to. He liked someone else. Jennifer knows a lot of things but she won't usually tell them.

I suppose you'll be starting off on your trip soon. Don't leave your passport behind like you did last time! And take your first-aid kit in case you have an accident.

Love from Julia

Letter from Jennifer Sutcliffe to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

It really isn't bad here. I'm enjoying it more than I expected to do. The weather has been very fine. We had to write a composition yesterday on "Can a good quality be carried to excess?" I couldn't think of anything to say. Next week it will be "Contrast the characters of Juliet and Desdemona." That seems silly too. Do you think I could have a new tennis racquet? I know you had mine restrung last autumn—but it feels all wrong. Perhaps it's got warped. I'd rather like to learn Greek. Can I? I love languages. Some of us are going to London to see the ballet next week. It's "Swan Lake." The food here is jolly good. Yesterday we had chicken for lunch, and we have lovely homemade cakes for tea.

I can't think of any more news—have you had any more burglaries?

Your loving daughter,
Jennifer

Letter from Margaret Gore-West, Senior Prefect, to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

There is very little news. I am doing German with Miss Vansittart this term. There is a rumour that Miss Bulstrode is going to retire and that Miss Vansittart will succeed her, but they've been saying that for over a year now, and I'm sure it isn't true. I asked Miss Chadwick (of course I wouldn't dare ask Miss Bulstrode!) and she was quite sharp about it. Said certainly not and don't listen to gossip. We went to the ballet on Tuesday. "Swan Lake." Too dreamy for words!

Princess Ingrid is rather fun. Very blue eyes, but she wears braces on her teeth. There are two new German girls. They speak English quite well.

Miss Rich is back and looking quite well. We did miss her last term. The new games mistress is called Miss Springer. She's terribly bossy and nobody likes her much. She coaches you at tennis very well, though. One of the new girls, Jennifer Sutcliffe, is going to be really good, I think. Her backhand's a bit weak. Her great friend is a girl called Julia. We call them the Jays!

You won't forget about taking me out on the 20th, will you? Sports Day is June 19th.

Your loving
Margaret

Letter from Ann Shapland to Denis Rathbone:

Dear Denis,

I shan't get any time off until the third week of term. I should like to dine with you then very much. It would have to be Saturday or Sunday. I'll let you know.

I find it rather fun working in a school. But thank God I'm not a schoolmistress! I'd go raving mad.

Yours ever,
Ann

Letter from Miss Johnson to her sister:

Dear Edith,

Everything much the same as usual here. The summer term is always nice. The garden is looking beautiful and we've got a new gardener to help old Briggs—young and strong! Rather good-looking, too, which is a pity. Girls are so silly.

Miss Bulstrode hasn't said anything more about retiring, so I hope she's got over the idea. Miss Vansittart wouldn't be at all the same thing. I really don't believe I would stay on.

Give my love to Dick and to the children, and remember me to Oliver and Kate when you see them.

Yours affectionately,
Elspeth

Letter from Mademoiselle Angele Blanche to René Dupont, Poste Restante, Bordeaux.

Dear René,

All is well here, though I cannot say that I amuse myself. The girls are neither respectful nor well behaved. I think it better, however, not to complain to Miss Bulstrode. One has to be on one's guard when dealing with that one!

There is nothing interesting at present to tell you.

Mouche

Letter from Miss Vansittart to a friend:

Dear Gloria,

The summer term has started smoothly. A very satisfactory set of new girls. The foreigners are settling down well. Our little Princess (the Middle East one, not the Scandinavian) is inclined to lack application, but I suppose one has to expect that. She has very charming manners.

The new games mistress, Miss Springer, is not a success. The girls dislike her and she is far too high-handed with them. After all, this is not an ordinary school. We don't stand or fall by P.T.! She is also very inquisitive, and asks far too many personal questions. That sort of thing can be very trying, and is so ill bred. Mademoiselle Blanche, the new French mistress, is quite amiable but not up to the standard of Mademoiselle Depuy.

We had a near escape on the first day of term. Lady Veronica Carlton-Sandways turned up completely intoxicated! But for Miss Chadwick spotting it and heading her off, we might have had a most unpleasant incident. The twins are such nice girls, too.

Miss Bulstrode has not said anything definite yet about the future—but from her manner, I think her mind is definitely made up. Meadowbank is a really fine achievement, and I shall be proud to carry on its traditions.

Give my love to Marjorie when you see her.

Yours ever,
Eleanor

Letter to Colonel Pikeaway, sent through the usual channels:

Talk of sending a man into danger! I'm the only able-bodied male in an establishment of, roughly, some hundred and fifty females.

Her Highness arrived in style. Cadillac of squashed strawberry and pastel blue, with Wog Notable in native dress, fashion-plate-from-Paris wife, and junior edition of same (H.R.H.).

Hardly recognized her the next day in her school uniform. There will be no difficulty in establishing friendly relations with her. She has already seen to that. Was asking me the names of various flowers in a sweet innocent way, when a female Gorgon with freckles, red hair, and a voice like a corncrake bore down upon her and removed her from my vicinity. She didn't want to go. I'd always understood these Oriental girls were brought up modestly behind the veil. This one must have had a little worldly experience during her schooldays in Switzerland, I think.

The Gorgon, alias Miss Springer, the games mistress, came back to give me a raspberry. Garden staff were not to talk to the pupils, etc. My turn to express innocent surprise. "Sorry, miss. The young lady was asking what these here delphiniums was. Suppose they don't have them in the parts she comes from." The Gorgon was easily pacified, in the end she almost simpered. Less success with Miss Bulstrode's secretary. One of these coat and skirt county girls. French mistress is more cooperative. Demure and mousy to look at, but not such a mouse really. Have also made friends with three pleasant gigglers, Christian names, Pamela, Lois, and Mary, surnames unknown, but of aristocratic lineage. A sharp old war-horse, called Miss Chadwick, keeps a wary eye on me, so I'm careful not to blot my copybook.

My boss, old Briggs, is a crusty kind of character whose chief subject of conversation is what things used to be in the good old days, when he was, I suspect, the fourth of a staff of five. He grumbles about most things and people, but has a wholesome respect for Miss Bulstrode herself. So have I. She had a few words (very pleasant) with me, but I had a horrid feeling she was seeing right through me and knowing all about me.

No sign, so far, of anything sinister—but I live in hope.

CHAPTER VI

EARLY DAYS

IN THE MISTRESSES' Common Room news was being exchanged. Foreign travel, plays seen, art exhibitions visited. Snapshots were handed round. The menace of coloured transparencies was in the offing. All the enthusiasts wanted to show their own pictures, but to get out of being forced to see other people's.

Presently conversation became less personal. The new Sports Pavilion was both criticized and admired. It was admitted to be a fine building, but naturally everybody would have liked to improve its design in one way or another.

The new girls were then briefly passed in review, and, on the whole, the verdict was favourable.

A little pleasant conversation was made to the two new members of the staff. Had Mademoiselle Blanche been in England before? What part of France did she come from?

Mademoiselle Blanche replied politely but with reserve.

Miss Springer was more forthcoming.

She spoke with emphasis and decision. It might almost have been said that she was giving a lecture. Subject: the excellence of Miss Springer. How much she had been appreciated as a colleague. How headmistresses had accepted her advice with gratitude and had reorganized their schedules accordingly.

Miss Springer was not sensitive. A restlessness in her audience was not noticed by her. It remained for Miss Johnson to ask in her mild tones:

"All the same, I expect your ideas haven't always been accepted in the way they—er—should have been."

"One must be prepared for ingratitude," said Miss Springer. Her voice, already loud, became louder. "The trouble is, people are so cowardly—won't face facts. They often prefer not to see what's under their noses all the time. I'm not like that. I go straight to the point. More than once I've unearthed a nasty scandal—brought it into the open. I've got a good nose—once I'm on the trail, I don't leave it—not till I've pinned down my quarry." She gave a loud jolly laugh. "In my opinion, no one should teach in a school whose life isn't an open book. If anyone's got anything to hide, one can soon tell. Oh! you'd be surprised if I told you some of the things I've found out about people. Things that nobody else had dreamt of."

"You enjoyed that experience, yes?" said Mademoiselle Blanche.

"Of course not. Just doing my duty. But I wasn't backed up. Shameful laxness. So I resigned—as a protest."

She looked round and gave her jolly sporting laugh again.

"Hope nobody here has anything to hide," she said gaily.

Nobody was amused. But Miss Springer was not the kind of woman to notice that.

ii

"Can I speak to you, Miss Bulstrode?"

Miss Bulstrode laid her pen aside and looked up into the flushed face of the matron, Miss Johnson.

"Yes, Miss Johnson."

"It's that girl Shaista—the Egyptian girl or whatever she is."

"Yes?"

"It's her—er—underclothing."

Miss Bulstrode's eyebrows rose in patient surprise.

"Her—well—her bust bodice."

"What is wrong with her brassière?"

"Well—it isn't an ordinary kind—I mean it doesn't hold her in, exactly. It—er—well it pushes her up—really quite unnecessarily."

Miss Bulstrode bit her lip to keep back a smile, as so often when in colloquy with Miss Johnson.

"Perhaps I'd better come and look at it," she said gravely.

A kind of inquest was then held with the offending contraption held up to display by Miss Johnson, while Shaista looked on with lively interest.

"It's this sort of wire and—er—boning arrangement," said Miss Johnson with disapprobation.

Shaista burst into animated explanation.

"But you see my breasts they are not very big—not nearly big enough. I do not look enough like a woman. And it is very important for a girl—to show she is a woman and not a boy."

"Plenty of time for that. You're only fifteen," said Miss Johnson.

"Fifteen—that *is* a woman! And I look like a woman, do I not?"

She appealed to Miss Bulstrode who nodded gravely.

"Only my breasts, they are poor. So I want to make them look not so poor. You understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Miss Bulstrode. "And I quite see your point of view. But in this school, you see, you are among girls who are, for the most part, English, and English girls are not very often women at the age of fifteen. I like my girls to use make-up discreetly and to wear clothes suitable to their stage of growth. I suggest that you wear your brassière when you are dressed for a party or for going to London, but not every day here. We do a good deal of sports and games here and for that your body needs to be free to move easily."

"It is too much—all this running and jumping," said Shaista sulkily, "*and* the P.T. I do not like Miss Springer—she always says 'Faster, faster, do not slack.' I get tired."

"That will do, Shaista," said Miss Bulstrode, her voice becoming authoritative. "Your family has sent you here to learn English ways. All this exercise will be very good for your complexion, *and* for developing your bust."

Dismissing Shaista, she smiled at the agitated Miss Johnson.

"It's quite true," she said. "The girl is fully mature. She might easily be over twenty by the look of her. And that is what she feels like. You can't expect her to feel the same age as Julia Upjohn, for instance. Intellectually Julia is far ahead of Shaista. Physically, she could quite well wear a liberty bodice still."

"I wish they were all like Julia Upjohn," said Miss Johnson.

"I don't," said Miss Bulstrode briskly. "A school full of girls all alike would be very dull."

Dull, she thought, as she went back to her marking of Scripture essays. That word had been repeating itself in her brain for some time now. Dull. . . .

If there was one thing her school was not, it was dull. During her career as its headmistress, she herself had never felt dull. There had been difficulties to combat, unforeseen crises, irritations with parents, with children; domestic upheavals. She had met and dealt with incipient disasters and turned them into triumphs. It had all been stimulating, exciting, supremely worth while. And even now, though she had made up her mind to it, she did not want to go.

She was physically in excellent health, almost as tough as when she and Chaddy (faithful Chaddy!) had started the great enterprise with a mere handful of children, and backing from a banker of unusual foresight. Chaddy's academic distinctions had been better than hers, but it was she who had had the vision to plan and make of the school a place of such distinction that it was known all over Europe. She had never been afraid to experiment, whereas Chaddy had been content to teach soundly but unexcitingly what she knew. Chaddy's supreme achievement had always been to be there, at hand, the faithful buffer, quick to render assistance when assistance was needed. As on the opening day of term with Lady Veronica. It was on her stolidity, Miss Bulstrode reflected, that an exciting edifice had been built.

Well, from the material point of view, both women had done very well out of it. If they retired now, they would both have a good assured income for the rest of their lives. Miss Bulstrode wondered if Chaddy would want to retire when she herself did. Probably not. Probably, to her, the school was home. She would continue, faithful and reliable, to buttress up Miss Bulstrode's successor.

Because Miss Bulstrode had made up her mind—a successor there must be. Firstly associated with herself in joint rule and then to rule alone. To know when to go—that was one of the great necessities of life. To go before one's powers began to fail, one's sure grip to loosen, before one felt the faint staleness, the unwillingness to envisage continuing effort.

Miss Bulstrode finished marking the essays and noted that the Upjohn child had an original mind. Jennifer Sutcliffe had a complete lack of imagination, but showed an unusually sound grasp of facts. Mary Vyse, of course, was scholarship class—a wonderfully retentive memory. But what a dull girl! Dull—that word again. Miss Bulstrode dismissed it from her mind and rang for her secretary.

She began to dictate letters.

Dear Lady Valence. Jane has had some trouble with her ears. I enclose the doctor's report . . .

Dear Baron Von Eisenger. We can certainly arrange for Hedwig to go to the Opera on the occasion of Hellstern's taking the role of Isolda . . .

An hour passed swiftly. Miss Bulstrode seldom paused for a word. Ann Shapland's pencil raced over the pad.

A very good secretary, Miss Bulstrode thought to herself. Better than Vera Lorrimer. Tiresome girl, Vera. Throwing up her post so suddenly. A nervous breakdown, she had said. Something to do with a man, Miss Bulstrode thought resignedly. It was usually a man.

"That's the lot," said Miss Bulstrode, as she dictated the last word. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"So many dull things to be done," she remarked. "Writing letters to parents is like feeding dogs. Pop some soothing platitude into every waiting mouth."

Ann laughed. Miss Bulstrode looked at her appraisingly.

"What made you take up secretarial work?"

"I don't quite know. I had no special bent for anything in particular, and it's the sort of thing almost everybody drifts into."

"You don't find it monotonous?"

"I suppose I've been lucky. I've had a lot of different jobs. I was with Sir Mervyn Todhunter, the archaeologist, for a year, then I was with Sir Andrew Peters in Shell. I was secretary to Monica Lord, the actress, for a while—that really was hectic!" She smiled in remembrance.

"There's a lot of that nowadays among you girls," said Miss Bulstrode. "All this chopping and changing." She sounded disapproving.

"Actually, I can't do anything for very long. I've got an invalid mother. She's rather—well—difficult from time to time. And then I have to go back home and take charge."

"I see."

"But all the same, I'm afraid I should chop and change anyway. I haven't got the gift for continuity. I find chopping and changing far less dull."

"Dull . . ." murmured Miss Bulstrode, struck again by the fatal word.

Ann looked at her in surprise.

"Don't mind me," said Miss Bulstrode. "It's just that sometimes one particular word seems to crop up all the time. How would you have liked to be a schoolmistress?" she asked, with some curiosity.

"I'm afraid I should hate it," said Ann frankly.

"Why?"

"I'd find it terribly dull. Oh, I am sorry."

She stopped in dismay.

"Teaching isn't in the least dull," said Miss Bulstrode with spirit. "It can be the most exciting thing in the world. I shall miss it terribly when I retire."

"But surely—" Ann stared at her. "Are you thinking of retiring?"

"It's decided—yes. Oh, I shan't go for another year—or even two years."

"But—why?"

"Because I've given my best to the school—and had the best from it. I don't want the second best."

"The school will carry on?"

"Oh yes. I have a good successor."

"Miss Vansittart, I suppose?"

"So you fix on her automatically?" Miss Bulstrode looked at her sharply. "That's interesting—"

"I'm afraid I hadn't really thought about it. I've just overheard the staff talking. I should think she'll carry on very well—exactly in your tradition.

And she's very striking looking, handsome and with quite a presence. I imagine that's important, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Yes, I'm sure Eleanor Vansittart is the right person."

"She'll carry on where you leave off," said Ann gathering up her things.

"But do I want that?" thought Miss Bulstrode to herself as Ann went out. "Carry on where I leave off? That's just what Eleanor will do! No new experiments, nothing revolutionary. That wasn't the way I made Meadowbank what it is. I took chances. I upset lots of people. I bullied and cajoled, and refused to follow the pattern of other schools. Isn't that what I want to follow on here now? Someone to pour new life into the school. Some dynamic personality . . . like—yes—Eileen Rich."

But Eileen wasn't old enough, hadn't enough experience. She was stimulating though, she could teach. She had ideas. She would never be dull. Nonsense, she must get that word out of her mind. Eleanor Vansittart was not dull . . .

She looked up as Miss Chadwick came in.

"Oh, Chaddy," she said. "I *am* pleased to see you!"

Miss Chadwick looked a little surprised.

"Why? Is anything the matter?"

"I'm the matter. I don't know my own mind."

"That's very unlike you, Honoria."

"Yes, isn't it? How's the term going, Chaddy?"

"Quite all right, I think." Miss Chadwick sounded a little unsure.

Miss Bulstrode pounced.

"Now then. Don't hedge. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Really, Honoria, nothing at all. It's just . . ." Miss Chadwick wrinkled up her forehead and looked rather like a perplexed Boxer dog. "Oh, a feeling. But really it's nothing that I can put my finger on. The new girls seem a pleasant lot. I don't care for Mademoiselle Blanche very much. But then I didn't like Genevieve Depuy, either. Sly."

Miss Bulstrode did not pay very much attention to this criticism. Chaddy always accused the French mistresses of being sly.

"She's not a good teacher," said Miss Bulstrode. "Surprising really. Her testimonials were so good."

"The French never can teach. No discipline," said Miss Chadwick. "And really Miss Springer is a little too much of a good thing! Leaps about so. Springer by nature as well as by name . . ."

"She's good at her job."

"Oh, yes, first class."

"New staff is always upsetting," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Yes," agreed Miss Chadwick eagerly. "I'm sure it's nothing more than that. By the way, that new gardener is quite young. So unusual nowadays. No gardeners seem to be young. A pity he's so good-looking. We shall have to keep a sharp eye open."

The two ladies nodded their heads in agreement. They knew, none better, the havoc caused by a good-looking young man to the hearts of adolescent girls.

CHAPTER VII

STRAWS IN THE WIND

"NOT TOO BAD, BOY," said old Briggs grudgingly, "not too bad."

He was expressing approval of his new assistant's performance in digging a strip of ground. It wouldn't do, thought Briggs, to let the young fellow get above himself.

"Mind you," he went on, "you don't want to rush at things. Take it steady, that's what I say. Steady is what does it."

The young man understood that his performance had compared rather too favourably with Briggs' own tempo of work.

"Now, along this here," continued Briggs, "we'll put some nice asters out. She don't like asters—but I pay no attention. Females has their whims, but if you don't pay no attention, ten to one they never notice. Though I will say she is the noticing kind on the whole. You'd think she 'ad enough to bother her head about, running a place like this."

Adam understood that the "She" who figured so largely in Briggs' conversation referred to Miss Bulstrode.

"And who was it I saw you talking to just now?" went on Briggs suspiciously, "when you went along to the potting shed for them bamboos?"

"Oh, that was just one of the young ladies," said Adam.

"Ah. One of them two Eye-ties, wasn't it? Now you be very careful, my boy. Don't you get mixed up with no Eye-ties. I know what I'm talkin' about. I knew Eye-ties, I did, in the first war and if I'd known then what I know now I'd have been more careful. See?"

"Wasn't no harm in it," said Adam, putting on a sulky manner. "Just passed the time of day with me, she did, and asked the names of one or two things."

"Ah," said Briggs, "but you be careful. It's not your place to talk to any of the young ladies. She wouldn't like it."

"I wasn't doing no harm and I didn't say anything I shouldn't."

"I don't say you did, boy. But I say a lot o' young females penned up together here with not so much as a drawing master to take their mind off things—well, you'd better be careful. That's all. Ah, here comes the Old Bitch now. Wanting something difficult, I'll be bound."

Miss Bulstrode was approaching with a rapid step. "Good morning, Briggs," she said. "Good morning—er—"

"Adam, miss."

"Ah yes, Adam. Well, you seem to have got that piece dug very satisfactorily. The wire netting's coming down by the far tennis court, Briggs. You'd better attend to that."

"All right, ma'am, all right. It'll be seen to."

"What are you putting in front here?"

"Well, ma'am, I had thought—"

"Not asters," said Miss Bulstrode, without giving him time to finish. "Pom-pom dahlias," she departed briskly.

"Coming along—giving orders," said Briggs. "Not that she isn't a sharp one. She soon notices if you haven't done work properly. And remember what I've said and be careful, boy. About Eye-ties and the others."

"If she's any fault to find with me, I'll soon know what I can do," said Adam sulkily. "Plenty o' jobs going."

"Ah. That's like you young men all over nowadays. Won't take a word from anybody. All I say is, mind your step."

Adam continued to look sulky, but bent to his work once more.

Miss Bulstrode walked back along the path toward the school. She was frowning a little.

Miss Vansittart was coming in the opposite direction.

"What a hot afternoon," said Miss Vansittart.

"Yes, it's very sultry and oppressive." Again Miss Bulstrode frowned. "Have you noticed that young man—the young gardener?"

"No, not particularly."

"He seems to me—well—an odd type," said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully. "Not the usual kind around here."

"Perhaps he's just come down from Oxford and wants to make a little money."

"He's good-looking. The girls notice him."

"The usual problem."

Miss Bulstrode smiled. "To combine freedom for the girls and strict supervision—is that what you mean, Eleanor?"

"Yes."

"We manage," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Yes, indeed. You've never had a scandal at Meadowbank, have you?"

"We've come near it once or twice," said Miss Bulstrode. She laughed. "Never a dull moment in running a school." She went on, "Do you ever find life dull here, Eleanor?"

"No, indeed," said Miss Vansittart. "I find the work here most stimulating and satisfying. You must feel very proud and happy, Honoria, at the great success you have achieved."

"I think I've made a good job of things," said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully. "Nothing, of course, is ever quite as one first imagined it . . .

"Tell me, Eleanor," she said suddenly, "if you were running this place instead of me, what changes would you make? Don't mind saying. I shall be interested to hear."

"I don't think I should want to make any changes," said Eleanor Vansittart. "It seems to me the spirit of the place and the whole organization is well-nigh perfect."

"You'd carry on on the same lines, you mean?"

"Yes, indeed. I don't think they could be bettered."

Miss Bulstrode was silent for a moment. She was thinking to herself: "I wonder if she said that in order to please me. One never knows with people. However close to them you may have been for years. Surely, she can't really mean that. Anybody with any creative feeling at all must want to make changes. It's true, though, that it mightn't have seemed tactful to say so . . . And tact is very important. It's important with parents, it's important with the girls, it's important with the staff. Eleanor certainly has tact."

Aloud, she said, "There must always be adjustments, though, mustn't there? I mean with changing ideas and conditions of life generally."

"Oh, that, yes," said Miss Vansittart. "One has, as they say, to go with the times. But it's your school, Honoria, you've made it what it is and your traditions are the essence of it. I think tradition is very important, don't you?"

Miss Bulstrode did not answer. She was hovering on the brink of irrevocable words. The offer of a partnership hung in the air. Miss Vansittart, though seeming unaware in her well-bred way, must be conscious of the fact that it was there. Miss Bulstrode did not know really what was holding her back. Why did she so dislike to commit herself? Probably, she admitted ruefully, because she hated the idea of giving up control. Secretly, of course, she wanted to stay, she wanted to go on running her school. But surely nobody could be a worthier successor than Eleanor? So dependable, so reliable. Of course, as far as that went, so was dear Chaddy—reliable as they came. And yet you could never envisage Chaddy as headmistress of an outstanding school.

"What do I want?" said Miss Bulstrode to herself. "How tiresome I am being! Really, indecision has never been one of my faults up to now."

A bell sounded in the distance.

"My German class," said Miss Vansittart. "I must go in." She moved at a rapid but dignified step toward the school buildings. Following her more slowly, Miss Bulstrode almost collided with Eileen Rich, hurrying from a side path.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Bulstrode. I didn't see you." Her hair, as usual, was escaping from its untidy bun. Miss Bulstrode noted anew the ugly but interesting bones of her face, a strange, eager, compelling young woman.

"You've got a class?" she asked.

"Yes. English."

"You enjoy teaching, don't you?" said Miss Bulstrode.

"I love it. It's the most fascinating thing in the world."

"Why?"

Eileen Rich stopped dead. She ran a hand through her hair. She frowned with the effort of thought.

"How interesting. I don't know that I've ever really thought about it. Why does one like teaching? Is it because it makes one feel grand and important? No, no . . . it's not as bad as that. No, it's more like fishing, I think. You don't know what catch you're going to get, what you're going to drag up from the sea. It's the quality of the response. It's so exciting when it comes. It doesn't very often, of course."

Miss Bulstrode nodded in agreement. She had been right! This girl had something!

"I expect you'll run a school of your own some day," she said.

"Oh, I hope so," said Eileen Rich. "I do hope so. That's what I'd like above anything."

"You've got ideas already, haven't you, as to how a school should be run?"

"Everyone has ideas, I suppose," said Eileen Rich. "I daresay a great many of them are fantastic and they'd go utterly wrong. That would be a risk, of course. But one would have to try them out. I would have to learn by experience. The awful thing is that one can't go by other people's experience, can one?"

"Not really," said Miss Bulstrode. "In life one has to make one's own mistakes."

"That's all right in life," said Eileen Rich, "in life you can pick yourself up and start again." Her hands, hanging at her sides, clenched themselves into fists. Her expression was grim. Then suddenly it relaxed into humour. "But if a school's gone to pieces, you can't very well pick that up and start again, can you?"

"If you ran a school like Meadowbank," said Miss Bulstrode, "would you make changes—experiment?"

Eileen Rich looked embarrassed. "That's—that's an awfully hard thing to say," she said.

"You mean you would," said Miss Bulstrode. "Don't mind speaking your mind, child."

"One would always want, I suppose, to use one's own ideas," said Eileen Rich. "I don't say they'd work. They mightn't."

"But it would be worth taking a risk?"

"It's always worth taking a risk, isn't it?" said Eileen Rich. "I mean if you feel strongly enough about anything."

"You don't object to leading a dangerous life. I see . . ." said Miss Bulstrode.

"I think I've always led a dangerous life." A shadow passed over the girl's face. "I must go. They'll be waiting." She hurried off.

Miss Bulstrode stood looking after her. She was still standing there lost in thought when Miss Chadwick came hurrying to find her.

"Oh! there you are. We've been looking everywhere for you. Professor Anderson has just rung up. He wants to know if he can take out Meroe this next week end. He knows it's against the rules so soon, but he's going off quite suddenly to—somewhere that sounds like Azure Basin."

"Azerbaijan," said Miss Bulstrode automatically, her mind still on her own thoughts.

"Not enough experience," she murmured to herself. "That's the risk. What did you say, Chaddy?"

Miss Chadwick repeated her message.

"I told Miss Shapland to say that we'd ring him back, and sent her to find you."

"Say it will be quite all right," said Miss Bulstrode. "I recognize that this is an exceptional occasion."

Miss Chadwick looked at her keenly.

"You're worrying, Honoria."

"Yes, I am. I don't really know my own mind. That's unusual for me—and it upsets me. I know what I'd like to do—but I feel that to hand over to someone without the necessary experience wouldn't be fair to the school."

"I wish you'd give up this idea of retirement. You belong here. Meadowbank needs you."

"Meadowbank means a lot to you, Chaddy, doesn't it?"

"There's no other school like it anywhere in England," said Miss Chadwick. "We can be proud of ourselves, you and I, for having started it."

Miss Bulstrode put an affectionate arm round her shoulders. "We can indeed, Chaddy. As for you, you're the comfort of my life. There's nothing about Meadowbank you don't know. You care for it as much as I do. And that's saying a lot, my dear."

Miss Chadwick flushed with pleasure. It was so seldom that Honoria Bulstrode broke through her reserve.

ii

"I simply can't play with the beastly thing. It's no good."

Jennifer flung her racquet down in despair.

"Oh, Jennifer, what a fuss you make."

"It's the balance." Jennifer picked it up again and waggled it experimentally. "It doesn't balance right."

"It's much better than my old thing," Julia compared her racquet. "Mine's like a sponge. Listen to the sound of it." She twanged. "We meant to have it restrung, but Mummy forgot."

"I'd rather have it than mine, all the same," Jennifer took it and tried a swish or two with it.

"Well, I'd rather have yours. I could really hit something then. I'll swop, if you will."

"All right then, swop."

The two girls peeled off the small pieces of adhesive tape on which their names were written, and reaffixed them, each to the other's racquet.

"I'm not going to swop back again," said Julia warningly. "So it's no use your saying you don't like the old sponge."

iii

Adam whistled cheerfully as he tacked up the wire netting round the tennis court. The door of the Sports Pavilion opened and Mademoiselle Blanche, the little mousy French mistress, looked out. She seemed startled at the sight of Adam. She hesitated for a moment and then went back inside.

"Wonder what she's been up to," said Adam to himself. It would not have occurred to him that Mademoiselle Blanche had been up to anything, if it had not been for her manner. She had a guilty look which immediately roused surmise in his mind. Presently she came out again, closing the door behind her, and paused to speak as she passed him.

"Ah, you repair the netting, I see?"

"Yes, miss."

"They are very fine courts here, and the swimming pool and the pavilion too. Oh, *le sport!* You think a lot in England of *le sport,* do you not?"

"Well, I suppose we do, miss."

"Do you play tennis yourself?" Her eyes appraised him in a definitely feminine way and with a faint invitation in her glance. Adam wondered once more about her. It struck him that Mademoiselle Blanche was a somewhat unsuitable French mistress for Meadowbank.

"No," he said untruthfully, "I don't play tennis. Haven't got the time."

"You play the cricket, then?"

"Oh, well, I played cricket as a boy. Most chaps do."

"I have not had much time to look around," said Angele Blanche. "Not until today and it was so fine I thought I would like to examine the Sports Pavilion. I wish to write home to my friends in France who keep a school."

Again Adam wondered a little. It seemed a lot of unnecessary explanation. It was almost as though Mademoiselle Blanche wished to excuse her presence out here at the Sports Pavilion. But why should she? She had a perfect right to go anywhere in the school grounds that she pleased. There was certainly no need to apologize for it to a gardener's assistant. It raised queries again in his mind. What had this young woman been doing in the Sports Pavilion?

He looked thoughtfully at Mademoiselle Blanche. It would be a good thing perhaps to know a little more about her. Subtly, deliberately, his manner changed. It was still respectful but not quite so respectful. He permitted his eyes to tell her that she was an attractive-looking young woman.

"You must find it a bit dull sometimes working in a girls' school, miss," he said.

"It does not amuse me very much, no."

"Still," said Adam, "I suppose you get your times off, don't you?"

There was a slight pause. It was as though she were debating with herself. Then, he felt it was with slight regret, the distance between them was deliberately widened.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I have very adequate time off. The conditions of employment here are excellent." She gave him a little nod of the head. "Good morning." She walked off toward the house.

"You've been up to something," said Adam to himself, "in the Sports Pavilion."

He waited till she was out of sight, then he left his work, went across to the Sports Pavilion and looked inside. But nothing that he could see was out of place. "All the same," he said to himself, "she was up to something."

As he came out again, he was confronted unexpectedly by Ann Shapland.

"Do you know where Miss Bulstrode is?" she asked.

"I think she's gone back to the house, miss. She was talking to Briggs just now."

Ann was frowning.

"What are you doing in the Sports Pavilion?"

Adam was slightly taken aback. "Nasty suspicious mind she's got," he thought. He said, with a faint insolence in his voice:

"Thought I'd like to take a look at it. No harm in looking, is there?"

"Oughtn't you to be getting on with your work?"

"I've just about finished nailing the wire round the tennis court." He turned, looking up at the building behind him. "This is new, isn't it? Must have cost a packet. The best of everything the young ladies here get, don't they?"

"They pay for it," said Ann drily.

"Pay through the nose, so I've heard," agreed Adam.

He felt a desire he hardly understood himself, to wound or annoy this girl. She was so cool always, so self-sufficient. He would really enjoy seeing her angry.

But Ann did not give him that satisfaction. She merely said:

"You'd better finish tacking up the netting," and went back toward the house. Halfway there, she slackened speed and looked back. Adam was busy at the tennis wire. She looked from him to the Sports Pavilion in a puzzled manner.

CHAPTER VIII

MURDER

ON NIGHT DUTY in Hurst St. Cyprian Police Station, Sergeant Green yawned. The telephone rang and he picked up the receiver. A moment later his manner had changed completely. He began scribbling rapidly on a pad.

"Yes? Meadowbank? Yes—and the name? Spell it, please. S—P—R—I—N—G—for greengage?—E—R. Springer. Yes. Yes, please see that nothing is disturbed. Someone'll be with you very shortly."

Rapidly and methodically he then proceeded to put into motion the various procedures indicated.

"Meadowbank?" said Detective Inspector Kelsey when his turn came. "That's the girls' school, isn't it? Who is it who's been murdered?"

"Seems to be Miss Springer, the games mistress."

"Death of a games mistress," said Kelsey, thoughtfully. "Sounds like the title of a thriller on a railway bookstall."

"Who's likely to have done her in, d'you think?" said the Sergeant. "Seems unnatural."

"Even games mistresses may have their love lives," said Detective Inspector Kelsey. "Where did they say the body was found?"

"In the Sports Pavilion. I suppose that's a fancy name for the gymnasium."

"Could be," said Kelsey. "Death of a Games Mistress in the Gymnasium. Sounds a highly athletic crime, doesn't it? Did you say she was shot?"

"Yes."

"They find the pistol?"

"No."

"Interesting," said Detective Inspector Kelsey, and having assembled his retinue, he departed to carry out his duties.

ii

The front door at Meadowbank was open, with light streaming from it, and here Inspector Kelsey was received by Miss Bulstrode herself. He knew her by sight, as indeed most people in the neighbourhood did. Even in this moment of confusion and uncertainty, Miss Bulstrode remained eminently herself, in command of the situation and in command of her subordinates.

"Detective Inspector Kelsey, madam," said the Inspector.

"What would you like to do first, Inspector Kelsey? Do you wish to go out to the Sports Pavilion or do you want to hear full details?"

"The doctor is with me," said Kelsey. "If you will show him and two of my men to where the body is, I should like a few words with you."

"Certainly. Come into my sitting room. Miss Rowan, will you show the doctor and the others the way?" She added, "One of my staff is out there seeing that nothing is disturbed."

"Thank you, madam."

Kelsey followed Miss Bulstrode into her sitting room. "Who found the body?"

"The matron, Miss Johnson. One of the girls had earache and Miss Johnson was up attending to her. As she did so, she noticed the curtains were not pulled properly and going to pull them she observed that there was a light on in the Sports Pavilion which there should not have been at 1 A.M.," finished Miss Bulstrode drily.

"Quite so," said Kelsey. "Where is Miss Johnson now?"

"She is here if you want to see her."

"Presently. Will you go on, madam?"

"Miss Johnson went and woke up another member of my staff, Miss Chadwick. They decided to go out and investigate. As they were leaving by the side door they heard the sound of a shot, whereupon they ran as quickly as they could toward the Sports Pavilion. On arrival there—"

The Inspector broke in. "Thank you, Miss Bulstrode. If, as you say, Miss Johnson is available, I will hear the next part from her. But first, perhaps, you will tell me something about the murdered woman."

"Her name is Grace Springer."

"She has been with you long?"

"No. She came to me this term. My former games mistress left to take up a post in Australia."

"And what did you know about this Miss Springer?"

"Her testimonials were excellent," said Miss Bulstrode.

"You didn't know her personally before that?"

"No."

"Have you any idea at all, even the vaguest, of what might have precipitated this tragedy? Was she unhappy? Any unfortunate entanglements?"

Miss Bulstrode shook her head. "Nothing that I know of. I may say," she went on, "that it seems to me most unlikely. She was not that kind of a woman."

"You'd be surprised," said Inspector Kelsey darkly.

"Would you like me to fetch Miss Johnson now?"

"If you please. When I've heard her story I'll go out to the gym—or the —what d'you call it?—Sports Pavilion."

"It is a newly built addition to the school this year," said Miss Bulstrode. "It is built adjacent to the swimming pool and it comprises a squash court and other features. The racquets, lacrosse and hockey sticks are kept there, and there is a drying room for swim suits."

"Was there any reason why Miss Springer should be in the Sports Pavilion at night?"

"None whatever," said Miss Bulstrode unequivocally.

"Very well, Miss Bulstrode. I'll talk to Miss Johnson now."

Miss Bulstrode left the room and returned bringing the matron with her. Miss Johnson had had a sizable dollop of brandy administered to her to pull her together after her discovery of the body. The result was a slightly added loquacity.

"This is Detective Inspector Kelsey," said Miss Bulstrode. "Pull yourself together, Elspeth, and tell him exactly what happened."

"It's dreadful," said Miss Johnson, "it's really dreadful. Such a thing has never happened before in all my experience. Never! I couldn't have believed it, I really couldn't've believed it. Miss Springer too!"

Inspector Kelsey was a perceptive man. He was always willing to deviate from the course of routine if a remark struck him as unusual or worth following up.

"It seems to you, does it," he said, "very strange that it was Miss Springer who was murdered?"

"Well, yes, it does, Inspector. She was so—well, so tough, you know. So hearty. Like the sort of woman one could imagine taking on a burglar singlehanded—or two burglars."

"Burglars? Hm," said Inspector Kelsey. "Was there anything to steal in the Sports Pavilion?"

"Well, no, really I can't see what there can have been. Swim suits of course, sports paraphernalia."

"The sort of thing a sneak-thief might have taken," agreed Kelsey. "Hardly worth breaking in for, I should have thought. Was it broken into, by the way?"

"Well, really, I never thought to look," said Miss Johnson. "I mean, the door was open when we got there and . . ."

"It had not been broken into," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I see," said Kelsey. "A key was used." He looked at Miss Johnson. "Was Miss Springer well liked?" he asked.

"Well, really, I couldn't say. I mean, after all, she's dead."

"So you didn't like her," said Kelsey perceptively, ignoring Miss Johnson's finer feelings.

"I don't think anyone could have liked her very much," said Miss Johnson. "She had a very positive manner, you know. Never minded contradicting people flatly. She was very efficient and took her work very seriously I should say, wouldn't you, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Certainly," said Miss Bulstrode.

Kelsey returned from the by-path he had been pursuing. "Now, Miss Johnson, let's hear just what happened."

"Jean, one of our pupils, had earache. She woke up with a rather bad attack of it and came to me. I got some remedies and when I'd got her back to bed, I saw the window curtains were ajar and thought perhaps it would be better for once if her window was not opened at night as it was blowing rather in that direction. Of course the girls always sleep with their windows open. We have difficulties sometimes with the foreigners, but I always insist that—"

"That really doesn't matter now," said Miss Bulstrode. "Our general rules of hygiene would not interest Inspector Kelsey."

"No, no, of course not," said Miss Johnson. "Well, as I say I went to shut the window and what was my surprise to see a light in the Sports Pavilion. It was quite distinct, I couldn't mistake it. It seemed to be moving about."

"You mean it was not the electric light turned on but the light of a flashlight?"

"Yes, yes, that's what it must have been. I thought at once 'Dear me, what's anyone doing out there at this time of night?' Of course I didn't think of burglars. That would have been a very fanciful idea, as you said just now."

"What did you think of?" asked Kelsey.

Miss Johnson shot a glance at Miss Bulstrode and back again.

"Well, really, I don't know that I had any ideas in particular. I mean, well—well really, I mean I couldn't think—"

Miss Bulstrode broke in. "I should imagine that Miss Johnson had the idea that one of our pupils might have gone out there to keep an assignation with someone," she said. "Is that right, Elspeth?"

Miss Johnson gasped. "Well, yes, the idea did come into my head just for the moment. One of our Italian girls, perhaps. Foreigners are so much more precocious than English girls."

"Don't be so insular," said Miss Bulstrode. "We've had plenty of English girls trying to make unsuitable assignations. It was a very natural thought to have occurred to you and probably the one that would have occurred to me."

"Go on," said Inspector Kelsey.

"So I thought the best thing," went on Miss Johnson, "was to go to Miss Chadwick and ask her to come out with me and see what was going on."

"Why Miss Chadwick?" asked Kelsey. "Any particular reason for selecting that particular mistress?"

"Well, I didn't want to disturb Miss Bulstrode," said Miss Johnson, "and I'm afraid it's rather a habit of ours always to go to Miss Chadwick if we don't want to disturb Miss Bulstrode. You see, Miss Chadwick's been here a very long time and has had so much experience."

"Anyway," said Kelsey, "you went to Miss Chadwick and woke her up. Is that right?"

"Yes. She agreed with me that we must go out there immediately. We didn't wait to dress or anything, just put on pullovers and coats and went out by the side door. And it was then, just as we were standing in the path, that we heard a shot from the Sports Pavilion. So we ran along the path as fast as we could. Rather stupidly we hadn't taken a flashlight with us and it was hard to see where we were going. We stumbled once or twice but we got there quite quickly. The door was open. We switched on the light and—"

Kelsey interrupted. "There was no light then when you got there? Not a flashlight or any other light?"

"No. The place was in darkness. We switched on the light and there she was. She—"

"That's all right," said Inspector Kelsey kindly, "you needn't describe anything. I shall be going out there now and I shall see for myself. You didn't meet anyone on your way there?"

"No."

"Or hear anybody running away?"

"No. We didn't hear anything."

"Did anybody else hear the shot in the school building?" asked Kelsey looking at Miss Bulstrode.

She shook her head. "No. Not that I know of. Nobody has said that they heard it. The Sports Pavilion is some distance away and I rather doubt if the shot would be noticeable."

"Perhaps from one of the rooms on the side of the house giving on the Sports Pavilion?"

"Hardly, I think, unless one were listening for such a thing. I'm sure it wouldn't be loud enough to wake anybody up."

"Well, thank you," said Inspector Kelsey. "I'll be going out to the Sports Pavilion now."

"I will come with you," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Do you want me to come too?" asked Miss Johnson. "I will if you like. I mean it's no good shirking things, is it? I always feel that one must face whatever comes and . . ."

"Thank you," said Inspector Kelsey, "there's no need, Miss Johnson. I wouldn't think of putting you to any further strain."

"So awful," said Miss Johnson, "it makes it worse to feel I didn't like her very much. In fact, we had a disagreement only last night in the Common Room. I stuck to it that too much P.T. was bad for some girls—the more delicate girls. Miss Springer said nonsense, that they were just the ones who needed it. Toned them up and made new women of them, she said. I said to her that really she didn't know everything though she might think she did. After all I have been professionally trained and I know a great deal more about delicacy and illness than Miss Springer does—did, though I've no doubt that Miss Springer knows everything about parallel bars and vaulting horses and coaching tennis. But, oh, dear, now I think of what's happened, I wish I hadn't said quite what I did. I suppose one always feels like that afterward when something dreadful has occurred. I really do blame myself."

"Now sit down there, dear," said Miss Bulstrode settling her on the sofa. "You just sit down and rest and pay no attention to any little disputes you may have had. Life would be very dull if we agreed with each other on every subject."

Miss Johnson sat down shaking her head, then yawned. Miss Bulstrode followed Kelsey into the hall.

"I gave her rather a lot of brandy," she said, apologetically. "It's made her a little voluble. But not confused, do you think?"

"No," said Kelsey. "She gave quite a clear account of what happened."

Miss Bulstrode led the way to the side door.

"Is this the way Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick went out?"

"Yes. You see it leads straight on to the path through the rhododendrons there which comes out at the Sports Pavilion."

The Inspector had a powerful flashlight and he and Miss Bulstrode soon reached the building where the lights were now glaring.

"Fine bit of building," said Kelsey, looking at it.

"It cost us a pretty penny," said Miss Bulstrode, "but we can afford it," she added serenely.

The open door led into a fair-sized room. There were lockers with the names of the various girls on them. At the end of the room there was a stand for tennis racquets and one for lacrosse sticks. The door at the side led off to showers and changing cubicles. Kelsey paused before going in. Two of his men had been busy. A photographer had just finished his job and another man who was busy testing for fingerprints looked up and said:

"You can walk straight across the floor, sir. You'll be all right. We haven't finished down this end yet."

Kelsey walked forward to where the police surgeon was kneeling by the body. The latter looked up as Kelsey approached.

"She was shot from about four feet away," he said. "Bullet penetrated the heart. Death must have been pretty well instantaneous."

"Shot from the front?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Say an hour or thereabouts."

Kelsey nodded. He strolled round to look at the tall figure of Miss Chadwick where she stood grimly, like a watchdog against one wall. About fifty-five, he judged, good forehead, obstinate mouth, untidy grey hair, no trace of hysteria. The kind of woman, he thought, who could be depended upon in a crisis though she might be overlooked in ordinary everyday life.

"Miss Chadwick?" he said.

"Yes."

"You came out with Miss Johnson and discovered the body?"

"Yes. She was just as she is now. She was dead."

"And the time?"

"I looked at my watch when Miss Johnson roused me. It was ten minutes to one."

Kelsey nodded. That agreed with the time that Miss Johnson had given him. He looked down thougthfully at the dead woman. Her bright red hair was cut short. She had a freckled face, with a chin which jutted out strongly, and a spare, athletic figure. She was wearing a tweed skirt and a heavy, dark pullover. She had brogues on her feet with no stockings.

"Any sign of the weapon?" asked Kelsey.

One of his men shook his head. "No sign at all, sir."

"What about the light?"

"There's a flashlight there in the corner."

"Any prints on it?"

"Yes. The dead woman's."

"So she's the one who had the light," said Kelsey thoughtfully. "She came out here with a flashlight—why?" He asked it partly of himself, partly of his men, partly of Miss Bulstrode and Miss Chadwick. Finally he seemed to concentrate on the latter. "Any ideas?"

Miss Chadwick shook her head. "No idea at all. I suppose she might have left something here—forgotten it this afternoon or evening—and come out to fetch it. But it seems rather unlikely in the middle of the night."

"It must have been something very important if she did," said Kelsey.

He looked round him. Nothing seemed disturbed except the stand of racquets at the end. That seemed to have been pulled violently forward. Several of the racquets were lying about on the floor.

"Of course," said Miss Chadwick, "she could have seen a light here, like Miss Johnson did later, and have come out to investigate. That seems the most likely thing to me."

"I think you're right," said Kelsey. "There's just one small matter. Would she have come out alone?"

"Yes." Miss Chadwick answered without hesitation.

"Miss Johnson," Kelsey reminded her, "came and woke you up."

"I know," said Miss Chadwick, "and that's what I should have done if I'd seen the light. I would have woken up Miss Bulstrode or Miss Vansittart or somebody. But Miss Springer wouldn't. She would have been quite confident—indeed would have preferred to tackle an intruder on her own."

"Another point," said the Inspector. "You came out through the side door with Miss Johnson. Was the side door unlocked?"

"Yes, it was."

"Presumably left unlocked by Miss Springer?"

"That seems the natural conclusion," said Miss Chadwick.

"So we assume," said Kelsey, "that Miss Springer saw a light out here in the gymnasium—Sports Pavilion—whatever you call it—that she came out to investigate and that whoever was here shot her." He wheeled round on Miss Bulstrode as she stood motionless in the doorway. "Does that seem right to you?" he asked.

"It doesn't seem right at all," said Miss Bulstrode. "I grant you the first part. We'll say Miss Springer saw a light out here and that she went out to investigate by herself. That's perfectly probable. But that the person she disturbed here should shoot her—that seems to me all wrong. If anyone was here who had no business to be here they would be more likely to run away, or to try to run away. Why should someone come to this place at this hour of night with a pistol? It's ridiculous, that's what it is. Ridiculous! There's nothing here worth stealing, certainly nothing for which it would be worth while doing murder."

"You think it more likely that Miss Springer disturbed a rendezvous of some kind?"

"That's the natural and most probable explanation," said Miss Bulstrode. "But it doesn't explain the fact of murder, does it? Girls in my school don't carry pistols about with them and any young man they might be meeting seems very unlikely to have a pistol either."

Kelsey agreed. "He'd have had a flick knife at most," he said. "There's an alternative," he went on. "Say Miss Springer came out here to meet a man—"

Miss Chadwick giggled suddenly. "Oh, no," she said, "not Miss Springer."

"I do not mean necessarily an amorous assignment," said the Inspector drily. "I'm suggesting that the murder was deliberate, that someone intended to murder Miss Springer, that they arranged to meet her here and shot her."

CHAPTER IX

CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS

LETTER FROM Jennifer Sutcliffe to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

We had a murder last night. Miss Springer, the gym mistress. It happened in the middle of the night and the police came and this morning they're asking everybody questions.

Miss Chadwick told us not to talk to anybody about it but I thought you'd like to know.

With love,
Jennifer

ii

Meadowbank was an establishment of sufficient importance to merit the personal attention of the Chief Constable. While routine investigation was going on Miss Bulstrode had not been inactive. She rang up a press magnate and the Home Secretary, both personal friends of hers. As a result of these maneuvers, very little had appeared about the event in the papers. A games mistress had been found dead in the School gymnasium. She had been shot, whether by accident or not was as yet not determined. Most of the notices of the event had an almost apologetic note in them, as though it were thoroughly tactless of any games mistress to get herself shot in such circumstances.

Ann Shapland had a busy day taking down letters to parents. Miss Bulstrode did not waste time in telling her pupils to keep quiet about the event. She knew that it would be a waste of time. More or less lurid reports would be sure to be penned to anxious parents and guardians. She intended her own balanced and reasonable account of the tragedy to reach them at the same time.

Later that afternoon she sat in conclave with Mr. Stone, the Chief Constable, and Inspector Kelsey. The police were perfectly amenable to having the press play the thing down as much as possible. It enabled them to pursue their inquiries quietly and without interference.

"I'm very sorry about this, Miss Bulstrode, very sorry indeed," said the Chief Constable. "I suppose it's—well—a bad thing for you."

"Murder's a bad thing for any school, yes," said Miss Bulstrode. "It's no good dwelling on that now, though. We shall weather it, no doubt, as we have weathered other storms. All I do hope is that the matter will be cleared up quickly."

"Don't see why it shouldn't, eh?" said Stone. He looked at Kelsey.

Kelsey said, "It may help when we get her background."

"D'you really think so?" asked Miss Bulstrode drily.

"Somebody may have had it in for her," Kelsey suggested.

Miss Bulstrode did not reply.

"You think it's tied up with this place?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Inspector Kelsey does really," said Miss Bulstrode. "He's only trying to save my feelings, I think."

"I think it does tie up with Meadowbank," said the Inspector slowly. "After all, Miss Springer had her times off like all the other members of the staff. She could have arranged a meeting with anyone if she had wanted to do so at any spot she chose. Why choose the gymnasium here in the middle of the night?"

"You have no objection to a search being made of the school premises, Miss Bulstrode?" asked the Chief Constable.

"None at all. You're looking for the pistol or revolver or whatever it is, I suppose?"

"Yes. It was a small pistol of foreign make."

"Foreign," said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully.

"To your knowledge, do any of your staff or any of the pupils have such a thing as a pistol in their possession?"

"Certainly not to my knowledge," said Miss Bulstrode. "I am fairly certain that none of the pupils have. Their possessions are unpacked for them when they arrive and such a thing would have been seen and noted, and would, I may say, have aroused considerable comment. But please, Inspector Kelsey, do exactly as you like in that respect. I see your men have been searching the grounds today."

The Inspector nodded. "Yes."

He went on: "I should also like interviews with the other members of your staff. One or other of them may have heard some remark made by Miss Springer that will give us a clue. Or may have observed some oddity of behaviour on her part." He paused, then went on, "The same thing might apply to the pupils."

Miss Bulstrode said: "I had formed the plan of making a short address to the girls this evening after prayers. I would ask that if any of them has any knowledge that might possibly bear upon Miss Springer's death that they should come and tell me of it."

"Very sound idea," said the Chief Constable.

"But you must remember this," said Miss Bulstrode, "one or other of the girls may wish to make herself important by exaggerating some incident or even by inventing one. Girls do very odd things; but I expect you are used to dealing with that form of exhibitionism."

"I've come across it," said Inspector Kelsey. "Now," he added, "please give me a list of your staff, also the servants."

iii

"I've looked through all the lockers out in the Pavilion, sir."

"And you didn't find anything?" said Kelsey.

"No, sir, nothing of importance. Funny things in some of them, but nothing in our line."

"None of them were locked, were they?"

"No, sir, they can lock. There were keys in them, but none of them were locked."

Kelsey looked round the bare floor thougthfully. The tennis racquets and lacrosse sticks had been replaced on their stands.

"Oh, well," he said, "I'm going up to the house now to have a talk with the staff."

"You don't think it was an inside job, sir?"

"It could have been," said Kelsey. "Nobody's got an alibi except those two mistresses, Chadwick and Johnson, and the child Jean that had the earache. Theoretically, everyone else was in bed and asleep, but there's no one to vouch for that. The girls all have separate rooms and naturally the staff do. Any one of them, including Miss Bulstrode herself, could have come out and met Springer here, or could have followed her here. Then, after she'd been shot, whoever it was could dodge back quietly into the house through the bushes to the side door, and be nicely back in bed again when the alarm was given. It's motive that's difficult. Yes," said Kelsey, "it's motive. Unless there's something going on here that we don't know anything about, there doesn't seem to *be* any motive."

He stepped out of the Pavilion and made his way slowly back to the house. Although it was past working hours, old Briggs, the gardener, was putting in a little work on a flower bed and he straightened up as the Inspector passed.

"You work late hours," said Kelsey, smiling.

"Ah," said Briggs. "Young'uns don't know what gardening is. Come on at eight and knock off at five—that's what they think it is. You've got to study your weather, some days you might as well not be out in the garden at all, and there's other days as you can work from seven in the morning until eight at night. That is if you love the place and have pride in the look of it."

"You ought to be proud of this one," said Kelsey. "I've never seen any place better kept these days."

"These days is right," said Briggs. "But I'm lucky I am. I've got a strong young fellow to work for me. A couple of boys, too, but they're not much good. Most of these boys and young men won't come and do this sort of work. All for going into factories, they are, or white collars and working in an office. Don't like to get their hands soiled with a bit of honest earth. But I'm lucky, as I say. I've got a good man working for me as came and offered himself."

"Recently?" said Inspector Kelsey.

"Beginning of the term," said Briggs. "Adam, his name is. Adam Goodman."

"I don't think I've seen him about," said Kelsey.

"Asked for the day off today, he did," said Briggs. "I give it him. Didn't seem to be much doing today with you people tramping all over the place."

"Somebody should have told me about him," said Kelsey sharply.

"What do you mean, told you about him?"

"He's not on my list," said the Inspector. "Of people employed here, I mean."

"Oh, well, you can see him tomorrow, mister," said Briggs. "Not that he can tell you anything, I don't suppose."

"You never know," said the Inspector.

A strong young man who had offered himself at the beginning of the term? It seemed to Kelsey that here was the first thing that he had come across which might be a little out of the ordinary.

iv

The girls filed into the hall for prayers that evening as usual, and afterward Miss Bulstrode arrested their departure by raising her hand.

"I have something to say to you all. Miss Springer, as you know, was shot last night in the Sports Pavilion. If any of you has heard or seen anything in the past week—anything that has puzzled you relating to Miss

Springer, anything Miss Springer may have said or someone else may have said of her that strikes you as at all significant, I should like to know it. You can come to me in my sitting room any time this evening."

"Oh," Julia Upjohn sighed, as the girls filed out, "how I wish we did know something! But we don't, do we, Jennifer?"

"No," said Jennifer, "of course we don't."

"Miss Springer always seemed so very ordinary," said Julia, sadly, "much too ordinary to get killed in a mysterious way."

"I don't suppose it was so mysterious," said Jennifer. "Just a burglar."

"Stealing our tennis racquets, I suppose," said Julia with sarcasm.

"Perhaps someone was blackmailing her," suggested one of the other girls hopefully.

"What about?" said Jennifer.

But nobody could think of any reason for blackmailing Miss Springer.

V

Inspector Kelsey started his interviewing of the staff with Miss Vansittart. A handsome woman, he thought, summing her up. Possibly forty or a little over; tall, well-built, grey hair tastefully arranged. She had dignity and composure, with a certain sense, he thought, of her own importance. She reminded him a little of Miss Bulstrode herself; she was the schoolmistress type all right. All the same, he reflected, Miss Bulstrode had something that Miss Vansittart had not. Miss Bulstrode had a quality of unexpectedness. He did not feel that Miss Vansittart would ever be unexpected.

Question and answer followed routine. In effect, Miss Vansittart had seen nothing, had noticed nothing, had heard nothing. Miss Springer had been excellent at her job. Yes, her manner had perhaps been a trifle brusque, but not, she thought, unduly so. She had not perhaps had a very attractive personality but that was really not a necessity in a games mistress. It was better, in fact, *not* to have mistresses who had attractive personalities. It did not do to let the girls get emotional about the mistresses. Miss Vansittart, having contributed nothing of value, made her exit.

"See no evil, hear no evil, think no evil. Same like the monkeys," observed Sergeant Percy Bond, who was assisting Inspector Kelsey in his task.

Kelsey grinned. "That's about right, Percy," he said.

"There's something about schoolmistresses that gives me the hump," said Sergeant Bond. "Had a terror of them ever since I was a kid. Knew one that was a holy terror. So upstage and la-di-da you never knew what she was trying to teach you."

The next mistress to appear was Eileen Rich. Ugly as sin was Inspector Kelsey's first reaction. Then he qualified it, she had a certain attraction. He started his routine questions, but the answers were not quite so routine as he had expected. After saying No, she had not heard or noticed anything special that anyone else had said about Miss Springer or that Miss Springer herself had said, Eileen Rich's next answer was not what he anticipated. He had asked:

"There was no one as far as you know who had a personal grudge against her?"

"Oh, no," said Eileen Rich quickly. "One couldn't have. I think that was her tragedy, you know. That she wasn't a person one could ever hate."

"Now just what do you mean by that, Miss Rich?"

"I mean she wasn't a person one could ever have wanted to destroy. Everything she did and was, was on the surface. She annoyed people. They often had sharp words with her, but it didn't mean anything. Not anything deep. I'm sure she wasn't killed for herself, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not quite sure that I do, Miss Rich."

"I mean if you had something like a bank robbery, she might quite easily be the cashier that gets shot, but it would be as a cashier not as Grace Springer. Nobody would love her or hate her enough to want to do away with her. I think she probably felt that without thinking about it, and that's what made her so officious. About finding fault, you know, and enforcing rules and finding out what people were doing that they shouldn't be doing, and showing them up."

"Snooping?" asked Kelsey.

"No, not exactly snooping." Eileen Rich considered. "She wouldn't tiptoe round on sneakers or anything of that kind. But if she found something going on that she didn't understand she'd be quite determined to get to the bottom of it. And she *would* get to the bottom of it."

"I see." He paused a moment. "You didn't like her yourself much, did you, Miss Rich?"

"I don't think I ever thought about her. She was just the games mistress. Oh! What a horrible thing that is to say about anybody! Just this—just that! But that's how *she* felt about her job. It was a job that she took pride in doing well. She didn't find it fun. She wasn't keen when she found a girl who might be really good at tennis, or really fine at some form of athletics. She didn't rejoice in it or triumph."

Kelsey looked at her curiously. An odd young woman, this, he thought.

"You seem to have your ideas on most things, Miss Rich," he said.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose I do."

"How long have you been at Meadowbank?"

"Just over a year and a half."

"There's never been any trouble before?"

"At Meadowbank?" She sounded startled.

"Yes."

"Oh, no. Everything's been quite all right until this term." Kelsey pounced.

"What's been wrong this term? You don't mean the murder, do you? You mean something else—"

"I don't—" she stopped. "Yes, perhaps I do—but it's all very nebulous."

"Go on."

"Miss Bulstrode's not been happy lately," said Eileen slowly. "That's one thing. You wouldn't know it. I don't think anybody else has even noticed it. But I have. And she's not the only one who's unhappy. But that isn't what you mean, is it? That's just people's feelings. The kind of things you get when you're cooped up together and think about one thing too much. You meant, was there anything that didn't seem right just this term. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Kelsey, looking at her curiously, "yes, that's it. Well, what about it?"

"I think there is something wrong here," said Eileen Rich slowly. "It's as though there were someone among us who didn't belong." She looked at him, smiled, almost laughed and said, "Cat among the pigeons, that's the sort of feeling. We're the pigeons, all of us, and the cat's among us. But we can't *see* the cat."

"That's very vague, Miss Rich."

"Yes, isn't it? It sounds quite idiotic. I can hear that myself. What I really mean, I suppose, is that there has been something, some little thing that I've noticed but I don't know what I've noticed."

"About anyone in particular?"

"No, I told you, that's just it. I don't know who it is. The only way I can sum it up is to say that there's someone here, who's—somehow—wrong! There's someone here—I don't know who—who makes me uncomfortable. Not when I'm looking at her but when she's looking at me because it's when she's looking at me that it shows, whatever it is. Oh, I'm getting more incoherent than ever. And anyway, it's only a feeling. It's not what you want. It isn't evidence."

"No," said Kelsey, "it isn't evidence. Not yet. But it's interesting, and if your feeling gets any more definite, Miss Rich, I'd be glad to hear about it."

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "because it's serious, isn't it? I mean, someone's been killed—we don't know why—and the killer may be miles away, or, on the other hand, the killer may be here in the school. And if so that pistol or revolver or whatever it is, must be here too. That's not a very nice thought, is it?"

She went out with a slight nod. Sergeant Bond said:

"Crackers—or don't you think so?"

"No," said Kelsey, "I don't think she's crackers. I think she's what's called a sensitive. You know, like the people who know when there's a cat in the room long before they see it. If she'd been born in an African tribe she might have been a witch doctor."

"They go round smelling out evil, don't they?" said Sergeant Bond.

"That's right, Percy," said Kelsey. "And that's exactly what I'm trying to do myself. Nobody's come across with any concrete facts so I've got to go about smelling out things. We'll have the Frenchwoman next."

CHAPTER X

FANTASTIC STORY

Mademoiselle Angele Blanche was thirty-five at a guess. No make-up, dark brown hair arranged neatly but unbecomingly. A severe coat and skirt.

It was Mademoiselle Blanche's first term at Meadowbank, she explained. She was not sure that she wished to remain for a further term.

"It is not nice to be in a school where murders take place," she said disapprovingly.

Also, there did not seem to be burglar alarms anywhere in the house—that was very dangerous.

"There's nothing of any great value, Mademoiselle Blanche, to attract burglars."

Mademoiselle Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"How does one know? These girls who come here, some of them have very rich fathers. They may have something with them of great value. A burglar knows about that, perhaps, and he comes here because he thinks this is an easy place to steal it."

"If a girl had something of value with her it wouldn't be in the gymnasium."

"How do you know?" said Mademoiselle. "They have lockers there, do they not, the girls?"

"Only to keep their sports kit in, and things of that kind."

"Ah yes, that is what is supposed. But a girl could hide anything in the toe of a gym shoe, or wrapped up in an old pullover or in a scarf."

"What sort of thing, Mademoiselle Blanche?"

But Mademoiselle Blanche had no idea what sort of thing.

"Even the most indulgent fathers don't give their daughters diamond necklaces to take to school," the Inspector said.

Again Mademoiselle Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps it is something of a different kind of value—a scarab, say, or something that a collector would give a lot of money for. One of the girls has a father who is an archaeologist."

Kelsey smiled. "I don't really think that's likely, you know, Mademoiselle Blanche."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, well, I only make the suggestion."

"Have you taught in any other English schools, Mademoiselle Blanche?"

"One in the north of England some time ago. Mostly I have taught in Switzerland and in France. Also in Germany. I think I will come to England to improve my English. I have a friend here. She went sick and she told me I could take her position here as Miss Bulstrode would be glad to find somebody quickly. So I came. But I do not like it very much. As I tell you, I do not think I shall stay."

"Why don't you like it?" Kelsey persisted.

"I do not like places where there are shootings," said Mademoiselle Blanche. "And the children, they are not respectful."

"They are not quite children, are they?"

"Some of them behave like babies, some of them might be twenty-five. There are all kinds here. They have much freedom. I prefer an establishment with more routine."

"Did you know Miss Springer well?"

"I knew her practically not at all. She had bad manners and I conversed with her as little as possible. She was all bones and freckles and a loud ugly voice. She was like caricatures of Englishwomen. She was rude to me often and I did not like it."

"What was she rude to you about?"

"She did not like me coming to her Sports Pavilion. That seems to be how she feels about it—or felt about it I mean—that it was her Sports Pavilion! I go there one day because I am interested. I have not been in it before and it is a new building. It is very well arranged and planned and I am just looking round. Then Miss Springer she comes and says 'What are you doing here? This is no business of yours to be in here.' She says that to me—me, a mistress in the school! What does she think I am, a pupil?"

"Yes, yes, very irritating I'm sure," said Kelsey, soothingly.

"The manners of a pig, that is what she had. And then she calls out 'Do not go away with the key in your hand.' She upset me. When I pull the door open the key fell out and I pick it up. I forget to put it back, because she has offended me. And then she shouts after me as though she thinks I was meaning to steal it. Her key, I suppose, as well as her Sports Pavilion."

"That seems a little odd, doesn't it?" said Kelsey, "that she should feel like that about the gymnasium, I mean. As though it were her private property, as though she were afraid of people finding something she had hidden there." He made the faint feeler tentatively, but Angele Blanche merely laughed.

"Hide something there—what could you hide in a place like that? Do you think she hides her love letters there? I am sure she had never had a love letter written to her! The other mistresses, they are at least polite. Miss Chadwick, she is old-fashioned and she fusses. Miss Vansittart, she is very nice, *grande dame*, sympathetic. Miss Rich, she is a little crazy I think, but friendly. And the younger mistresses are quite pleasant."

Angele Blanche was dismissed after a few more unimportant questions.

"Touchy," said Bond. "All the French are touchy."

"All the same, it's interesting," said Kelsey. "Miss Springer didn't like people prowling about her gymnasium—Sports Pavilion—I don't know what to call the thing. Now why?"

"Perhaps she thought the Frenchwoman was spying on her," suggested Bond.

"Well, but why should she think so? I mean, ought it to have mattered to her that Angele Blanche should spy on her unless there was something she was afraid of Angele Blanche finding out?

"Who have we got left?" he added.

"The two junior mistresses, Miss Blake and Miss Rowan, and Miss Bulstrode's secretary."

Miss Blake was young and earnest with a round good-natured face. She taught botany and physics. She had nothing much to say that could help. She had seen very little of Miss Springer and had no idea of what could have led to her death.

Miss Rowan, as befitted one who held a degree in psychology, had views to express. It was highly probable, she said, that Miss Springer had committed suicide.

Inspector Kelsey raised his eyebrows.

"Why should she? Was she unhappy in any way?"

"She was aggressive," said Miss Rowan, leaning forward and peering eagerly through her thick lenses. "Very aggressive. I consider that significant. It was a defense mechanism, to conceal a feeling of inferiority."

"Everything I've heard so far," said Inspector Kelsey, "points to her being very sure of herself."

"Too sure of herself," said Miss Rowan darkly. "And several of the things she said bear out my assumption."

"Such as?"

"She hinted at people being 'not what they seemed.' She mentioned that at the last school where she was employed, she had 'unmasked' someone. The Headmistress, however, had been prejudiced, had refused to listen to what she had found out. Several of the other mistresses, too, had been what she called 'against her.'

"You see what that means, Inspector?" Miss Rowan nearly fell off her chair as she leaned forward excitedly. Strands of lank dark hair fell forward across her face. "The beginning of a persecution complex."

Inspector Kelsey said politely that Miss Rowan might be correct in her assumptions, but that he couldn't accept the theory of suicide, unless Miss Rowan could explain how Miss Springer had managed to shoot herself from a distance of at least four feet away, and had also been able to make the pistol disappear into thin air afterward.

Miss Rowan retorted acidly that the police were well known to be prejudiced against psychology.

She then gave place to Ann Shapland.

"Well, Miss Shapland," said Inspector Kelsey, eying her neat and businesslike appearance with favour, "what light can you throw upon this matter?"

"Absolutely none, I'm afraid. I've got my own sitting room, and I don't see much of the staff. The whole thing's unbelievable."

"In what way unbelievable?"

"Well, first that Miss Springer should get shot at all. Say somebody broke into the gymnasium and she went out to see who it was. That's all right, I suppose, but who'd want to break into the gymnasium?"

"Boys, perhaps, or some young locals who wanted to help themselves to equipment of some kind or another, or who did it for a lark."

"If that's so, I can't help feeling that what Miss Springer would have said was: 'Now then, what are you doing here? Be off with you' and they'd have gone off."

"Did it ever seem to you that Miss Springer adopted any particular attitude about the Sports Pavilion?"

Ann Shapland looked puzzled. "Attitude?"

"I mean did she regard it as her special province and dislike other people going there?"

"Not that I know of. Why should she? It was just part of the school buildings."

"You didn't notice anything yourself? You didn't find that if you went there she resented your presence—anything of that kind?"

Ann Shapland shook her head. "I haven't been out there myself more than a couple of times. I haven't the time. I've gone out there once or twice with a message for one of the girls from Miss Bulstrode. That's all."

"You didn't know that Miss Springer had objected to Mademoiselle Blanche being out there?"

"No, I didn't hear anything about that. Oh, yes, I believe I did. Mademoiselle Blanche was rather cross about something one day, but then she is a little bit touchy, you know. There was something about her going into the drawing class one day and resenting something the drawing mistress said to her. Of course she hasn't really very much to do—Mademoiselle Blanche, I mean. She only teaches one subject—French, and she has a lot of time on her hands. I think—" she hesitated, "I think she is perhaps rather an inquisitive person."

"Do you think it likely that when she went into the Sports Pavilion she was poking about in any of the lockers?"

"The girls' lockers? Well, I wouldn't put it past her. She might amuse herself that way."

"Does Miss Springer herself have a locker out there?"

"Yes, of course."

"If Mademoiselle Blanche was caught poking about in Miss Springer's locker, then I can imagine that Miss Springer would be annoyed?"

"She certainly would!"

"You don't know anything about Miss Springer's private life?"

"I don't think anyone did," said Ann. "Did she have one, I wonder?"

"And there's nothing else—nothing connected with the Sports Pavilion, for instance, that you haven't told me?"

"Well—" Ann hesitated.

"Yes, Miss Shapland, let's have it."

"It's nothing really," said Ann slowly. "But one of the gardeners—not Briggs, the young one—I saw him come out of the Sports Pavilion one day, and he had no business to be in there at all. Of course it was probably just curiosity on his part—or perhaps an excuse to slack off for a bit from work—he was supposed to be nailing down the wire on the tennis court. I don't suppose really there's anything in it."

"Still, you remembered it," Kelsey pointed out. "Now why?"

"I think—" she frowned. "Yes, because his manner was a little odd. Defiant. And—he sneered at all the money that was spent here on the girls."

"That sort of attitude . . . I see."

"I don't suppose there's really anything in it."

"Probably not—but I'll make a note of it, all the same."

"Round and round the mulberry bush," said Bond when Ann Shapland had gone. "Same thing over and over again! For goodness' sake let's hope we get something out of the servants."

But they got very little out of the servants.

"It's no use asking me anything, young man," said Mrs. Gibbons, the cook. "For one thing I can't hear what you say, and for another I don't know a thing. I went to sleep last night and I slept unusual heavy. Never heard anything of all the excitement there was. Nobody woke me up and told me anything about it." She sounded injured. "It wasn't until this morning I heard."

Kelsey shouted a few questions and got a few answers that told him nothing.

Miss Springer had come new this term, and she wasn't as much liked as Miss Lorrimer who'd held the post before her. Miss Shapland was new, too, but she was a nice young lady, Mademoiselle Blanche was like all the Frenchies—thought the other mistresses were against her and let the young ladies treat her something shocking in class. "Not a one for crying, though," Mrs. Gibbons admitted. "Some schools I've been in the French mistresses used to cry something awful!"

Most of the domestic staff were dailies.

There was only one other maid who slept in the house, and she proved equally uniformative, though able to hear what was said to her. She couldn't say, she was sure. She didn't know nothing. Miss Springer was a bit sharp in her manner. She didn't know nothing about the Sports Pavilion nor what was kept there, and she'd never seen nothing like a pistol nowhere.

This negative spate of information was interrupted by Miss Bulstrode.

"One of the girls would like to speak to you, Inspector Kelsey," she said.

Kelsey looked up sharply. "Indeed? She knows something?"

"As to that I'm rather doubtful," said Miss Bulstrode, "but you had better talk to her yourself. She is one of our foreign girls, Princess Shaista—niece of the Emir Ibrahim. She is inclined to think, perhaps, that she is of rather more importance than she is. You understand?"

Kelsey nodded comprehendingly. Then Miss Bulstrode went out and a slight dark girl of middle height came in.

She looked at them, almond eyed and demure.

"You are the police?"

"Yes," said Kelsey smiling, "we are the police. Will you sit down and tell me what you know about Miss Springer?"

"Yes, I will tell you."

She sat down, leaned forward, and lowered her voice dramatically.

"There have been people watching this place. Oh, they do not show themselves clearly, but they are there!"

She nodded her head significantly.

Inspector Kelsey thought that he understood what Miss Bulstrode had meant. This girl was dramatizing herself—and enjoying it.

"And why should they be watching the school?"

"Because of me! They want to kidnap me."

Whatever Kelsey had expected, it was not this. His eyebrows rose.

"Why should they want to kidnap you?"

"To hold me to ransom, of course. Then they would make my relations pay much money."

"Er—well—perhaps," said Kelsey dubiously. "But—er—supposing this is so, what has it got to do with the death of Miss Springer?"

"She must have found out about them," said Shaista. "Perhaps she told them she had found out something. Perhaps she threatened them. Then perhaps they promised to pay her money if she would say nothing. And she believed them. So she goes out to the Sports Pavilion where they say they will pay her the money, and then they shoot her."

"But surely Miss Springer would never have accepted blackmail money?"

"Do you think it is such fun to be a school teacher—to be a teacher of gymnastics?" Shaista was scornful. "Do you not think it would be nice instead to have money, to travel, to do what you want? Especially someone like Miss Springer who is not beautiful, at whom men do not even look! Do you not think that money would attract her more than it would attract other people?"

"Well—er—" said Inspector Kelsey, "I don't know quite what to say." He had not had this point of view presented to him before.

"This is just—er—your own idea?" he said. "Miss Springer never said anything to you?"

"Miss Springer never said anything except 'Stretch and Bend,' and 'Faster,' and 'Don't slack,' " said Shaista with resentment.

"Yes—quite so. Well, don't you think you may have imagined all this about kidnaping?"

Shaista was immediately much annoyed.

"You do not understand at all! My cousin was Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat. He was killed in a revolution, or at least in fleeing from a revolution. It was understood that when I grew up I should marry him. So you see I am an important person. It may be perhaps the Communists who come here. Perhaps it is not to kidnap. Perhaps they intend to assassinate me."

Inspector Kelsey looked still more incredulous.

"That's rather farfetched, isn't it?"

"You think such things could not happen? I say they can. They are very very wicked, the Communists! Everybody knows that."

As he still looked dubious, she went on:

"Perhaps they think I know where the jewels are!"

"What jewels?"

"My cousin had jewels. So had his father. My family always has a hoard of jewels. For emergencies, you comprehend."

She made it sound very matter of fact.

Kelsey stared at her.

"But what has all this got to do with you—or with Miss Springer?"

"But I already tell you! They think, perhaps, I know where the jewels are. So they will take me prisoner and force me to speak."

"Do you know where the jewels are?"

"No, of course I do not know. they disappeared in the revolution. Perhaps the wicked Communists take them. But again, perhaps not."

"Who do they belong to?"

"Now my cousin is dead, they belong to me. No men in his family any more. His aunt, my mother, is dead. He would want them to belong to me. If he were not dead, I marry him."

"That was the arrangement?"

"I have to marry him. He is my cousin, you see."

"And you would have got the jewels when you married him?"

"No, I would have had new jewels. From Cartier in Paris. These others would still be kept for emergencies."

Inspector Kelsey blinked, letting this Oriental insurance scheme for emergencies sink into his consciousness.

Shaista was racing on with great animation.

"I think that is what happens. Somebody gets the jewels out of Ramat. Perhaps good person, perhaps bad. Good person would bring them to me, would say: 'These are yours,' and I should reward him."

She nodded her head regally, playing the part.

"Quite a little actress," thought the Inspector.

"But if it was a bad person, he would keep the jewels and sell them. Or he would come to me and say: 'What will you give me as a reward if I bring them to you?' And if it is worth while, he brings—but if not, then not!"

"But in actual fact, nobody has said anything at all to you?"

"No," admitted Shaista.

Inspector Kelsey made up his mind.

"I think, you know," he said pleasantly, "that you're really talking a lot of nonsense."

Shaista flashed a furious glance at him.

"I tell you what I know, that is all," she said sulkily.

"Yes—well, it's very kind of you, and I'll bear it in mind."

He got up and opened the door for her to go out.

"The Arabian Nights aren't in it," he said, as he returned to the table. "Kidnaping and fabulous jewels! What next?"

CHAPTER XI

CONFERENCE

WHEN INSPECTOR KELSEY returned to the station, the sergeant on duty said:

"We've got Adam Goodman here, waiting, sir."

"Adam Goodman? Oh, yes. The gardener."

A young man had risen respectfully to his feet. He was tall, dark and good-looking. He wore stained corduroy trousers loosely held up by an aged belt, and an open-necked shirt of very bright blue.

"You wanted to see me, I hear."

His voice was rough, and as that of so many young men of today, slightly truculent.

Kelsey said merely:

"Yes, come into my room."

"I don't know anything about the murder," said Adam Goodman sulkily. "It's nothing to do with me. I was at home and in bed last night."

Kelsey merely nodded noncommittally.

He sat down at his desk, and motioned to the young man to take the chair opposite. A young policeman in plain clothes had followed the two men in unobtrusively and sat down a little distance away.

"Now then," said Kelsey. "You're Goodman—" he looked at a note on his desk, "Adam Goodman."

"That's right, sir. But first, I'd like to show you this."

Adam's manner had changed. There was no truculence or sulkiness in it now. It was quiet and deferential. He took something from his pocket and passed it across the desk. Inspector Kelsey's eyebrows rose very slightly as he studied it. Then he raised his head.

"I shan't need you, Barber," he said.

The discreet young policeman got up and went out. He managed not to look surprised, but he was.

"Ah," said Kelsey. He looked across at Adam with speculative interest. "So that's who you are? And what the hell, I'd like to know, are you—"

"Doing in a girls' school?" the young man finished for him. His voice was still deferential, but he grinned in spite of himself. "It's certainly the first time I've had an assignment of that kind. Don't I look like a gardener?"

"Not around these parts. Gardeners are usually rather ancient. Do you know anything about gardening?"

"Quite a lot. I've got one of these gardening mothers. England's specialty. She's seen to it that I'm a worthy assistant to her."

"And what exactly is going on at Meadowbank—to bring you on the scene?"

"We don't know, actually, that there's anything going on at Meadowbank. My assignment is in the nature of a watching brief. Or was—until last night. Murder of a games mistress. Not quite in the school's curriculum."

"It could happen," said Inspector Kelsey. He sighed. "Anything could happen—anywhere. I've learnt that. But I'll admit that it's a little off the beaten track. What's behind all this?"

Adam told him. Kelsey listened with interest.

"I did that girl an injustice," he remarked. "But you'll admit it sounds too fantastic to be true. Jewels worth between half a million and a million pounds? Who do you say they belong to?"

"That's a very pretty question. To answer it, you'd have to have a gaggle of international lawyers on the job, and they'd probably disagree. You could argue the case a lot of ways. They belonged, three months ago, to His Highness Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat. But now? If they'd turned up in Ramat they'd have been the property of the present Government, they'd have made sure of that. Ali Yusuf may have willed them to someone. A lot would then depend on where the will was executed and could be proved. They may belong to his family. But the real essence of the matter is that if you or I happened to pick them up in the street and put them in our pockets, they would for all practical purposes belong to us. That is, I doubt if any legal machinery exists that could get them away from us. They could try, of course, but the intricacies of international law are quite incredible . . ."

"You mean that, practically speaking, it's findings are keepings?" asked Inspector Kelsey. He shook his head disapprovingly. "That's not very nice," he said primly.

"No," said Adam grimly. "It's not very nice. There's more than one lot after them, too. None of them scrupulous. Word's got around, you see. It may be a rumour, it may be true, but the story is that they were got out of Ramat just before the bust up. There are a dozen different tales of how."

"But why Meadowbank? Because of little Princess Butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth?"

"Princess Shaista, first cousin of Ali Yusuf. Yes. Someone may try and deliver the goods to her or communicate with her. There are some questionable characters from our point of view hanging about the neighbourhood. A Mrs. Kolinsky, for instance, staying at the Grand Hotel. Quite a prominent member of what one might describe as International Riff-Raff Ltd. Nothing in *your* line, always strictly within the law, all perfectly respectable, but a grand picker-up of useful information. Then there's a woman who was out in Ramat dancing in a cabaret there. She's reported to have been working for a certain foreign government. Where she is now we don't know, we don't even know what she looks like, but there's a rumour that she *might* be in this part of the world. Looks, doesn't it, as though it were all centering round Meadowbank? And last night, Miss Springer gets herself killed."

Kelsey nodded thoughtfully.

"Proper mix-up," he observed. He struggled a moment with his feelings. "You see this sort of thing on the Telly . . . farfetched—that's what you think . . . can't really happen. And it doesn't—not in the normal course of events."

"Secret agents, robbery, violence, murder, double-crossing," agreed Adam. "All preposterous—but that side of life exists."

"But not at Meadowbank!"

The words were wrung from Inspector Kelsey.

"I perceive your point," said Adam. *"Lèse majesté."*

There was a silence, and then Inspector Kelsey asked:

"What do *you* think happened last night?"

Adam took his time, then he said slowly:

"Springer was in the Sports Pavilion—in the middle of the night. Why? We've got to start there. It's no good asking ourselves who killed her until we've made up our minds why she was there, in the Sports Pavilion at that time of night. We can say that in spite of her blameless and athletic life she wasn't sleeping well, and got up and looked out of her window and saw a light in the Sports Pavilion—her window does look out that way?"

Kelsey nodded.

"Being a tough and fearless young woman, she went out to investigate. She disturbed someone there who was—doing what? We don't know. But it was someone desperate enough to shoot her dead."

Again Kelsey nodded.

"That's the way we've been looking at it," he said. "But your last point had me worried all along. You don't shoot to kill—and come prepared to do so, unless—"

"Unless you're after something big? Agreed! Well, that's the case of what we might call Innocent Springer—shot down in the performance of duty. But there's another possibility. Springer, as a result of private information, gets a job at Meadowbank or is detailed for it by her bosses—because of her qualifications. She waits until a suitable night, then slips out to the Sports Pavilion—again our stumbling block of a question—*why?* Somebody is following her—or waiting for her—someone who carries a pistol and is prepared to use it. But again—why? What for? In fact, what the devil is there about the Sports Pavilion? It's not the sort of place that one can imagine hiding anything."

"There wasn't anything hidden there, I can tell you that. We went through it with a fine tooth comb—the girls' lockers, Miss Springer's ditto. Sports equipment of various kinds, all normal and accounted for. *And* a brand new building! There wasn't anything there in the nature of jewelry."

"Whatever it was it could have been removed, of course. By the murderer," said Adam. "The other possibility is that the Sports Pavilion was simply used as a rendezvous—by Miss Springer or by someone else. It's quite a handy place for that. Reasonable distance from the house. Not too far. And if anyone was noticed going out there, a simple answer would be that whoever it was thought they had seen a light, etc., etc. Let's say that Miss Springer went out to meet someone—there was a disagreement and she got shot. Or, a variation, Miss Springer noticed someone leaving the house, followed that someone, intruded upon something she wasn't meant to see or hear."

"I never met her alive," said Kelsey, "but from the way everyone speaks of her, I get the impression that she might have been a nosy woman."

"I think that's really the most probable explanation," agreed Adam. "Curiosity killed the cat. Yes, I think that's the way the Sports Pavilion comes into it."

"But if it was a rendezvous, then—" Kelsey paused.

Adam nodded vigorously.

"Yes. It looks as though there is someone in the school who merits our very close attention. Cat among the pigeons, in fact."

"Cat among the pigeons," said Kelsey, struck by the phrase. "Miss Rich, one of the mistresses, said something like that today."

He reflected a moment or two.

"There were three newcomers to the staff this term," he said. "Shapland, the secretary; Blanche, the French mistress; and, of course, Miss Springer herself. She's dead and out of it. If there is a cat among the pigeons, it would seem that one of the other two would be the most likely bet." He looked toward Adam. "Any ideas, as between the two of them?"

Adam considered.

"I caught Mademoiselle Blanche coming out of the Sports Pavilion one day. She had a guilty look. As though she'd been doing something she ought not to have done. All the same, on the whole—I think I'd plump for the other. For Shapland. She's a cool customer and she's got brains. I'd go into her antecedents rather carefully if I were you. What the devil are you laughing for?"

Kelsey was grinning.

"She was suspicious of *you,"* he said. "Caught *you* coming out of the Sports Pavilion—and thought there was something odd about your manner!"

"Well, I'm damned!" Adam was indignant. "The cheek of her!"

Inspector Kelsey resumed his authoritative manner.

"The point is," he said, "that we think a lot of Meadowbank round these parts. It's a fine school. And Miss Bulstrode's a fine woman. The sooner we can get to the bottom of all this, the better for the school. We want to clear things up and give Meadowbank a clean bill of health."

He paused, looking thoughtfully at Adam.

"I think," he said, "we'll have to tell Miss Bulstrode who you are. She'll keep her mouth shut—don't fear for that."

Adam considered for a moment. Then he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said. "Under the circumstances, I think it's more or less inevitable."

CHAPTER XII

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

MISS BULSTRODE HAD another faculty which demonstrated her superiority over most other women. She could listen.

She listened in silence to both Inspector Kelsey and Adam. She did not so much as raise an eyebrow. Then she uttered one word.

"Remarkable."

"It's you who are remarkable," thought Adam, but he did not say so aloud.

"Well," said Miss Bulstrode, coming, as was habitual to her, straight to the point. "What do you want me to do?"

Inspector Kelsey cleared his throat.

"It's like this," he said. "We felt that you ought to be fully informed—for the sake of the school."

Miss Bulstrode nodded.

"Naturally," she said, "the school is my first concern. It has to be. I am responsible for the care and safety of my pupils—and in a lesser degree for that of my staff. And I would like to add now that if there can be as little publicity as possible about Miss Springer's death—the better it will be for me. This is a purely selfish point of view—though I think my school is important in itself—not only to me. And I quite realize that if full publicity is necessary for you, then you will have to go ahead. But is it?"

"No," said Inspector Kelsey. "In this case I should say the less publicity the better. The inquest will be adjourned and we'll let it get about that we think it was a local affair. Young thugs—or juvenile delinquents, as we have to call them nowadays—out with guns among them, trigger happy. It's usually flick knives, but some of these boys do get hold of guns. Miss Springer surprised them. They shot her. That's what I should like to let it go at—then we can get to work quietlike. Not more than can be helped in the press. But of course, Meadowbank's famous. It's news. And murder at Meadowbank will be hot news."

"I think I can help you there," said Miss Bulstrode crisply, "I am not without influence in high places." She smiled and reeled off a few names. These included the Home Secretary, two press barons, a bishop and the Minister of Education. "I'll do what I can." She looked at Adam. "You agree?"

Adam spoke quickly.

"Yes, indeed. We always like things nice and quiet."

"Are you continuing to be my gardener?" inquired Miss Bulstrode.

"If you don't object. It puts me right where I want to be. And I can keep an eye on things."

This time Miss Bulstrode's eyebrows did rise.

"I hope you're not expecting any more murders?"

"No, no."

"I'm glad of that. I doubt if any school could survive two murders in one term."

She turned to Kesley.

"Have you people finished with the Sports Pavilion? It's awkward if we can't use it."

"We've finished with it. Clean as a whistle—from our point of view, I mean. For whatever reason the murder was committed—there's nothing there now to help us. It's just a Sports Pavilion with the usual equipment."

"Nothing in the girls' lockers?"

Inspector Kelsey smiled.

"Well—this and that—copy of a book—French—called *Candide*—with —er—illustrations. Expensive book."

"Ah," said Miss Bulstrode. "So that's where she keeps it! Giselle d'Aubray, I suppose?"

Kelsey's respect for Miss Bulstrode rose.

"You don't miss much, ma'am," he said.

"She won't come to harm with *Candide,"* said Miss Bulstrode. "It's a classic. Some forms of pornography I do confiscate. Now I come back to my first question. You have relieved my mind about the publicity connected with the school. Can the school help you in any way? Can *I* help you?"

"I don't think so, at the moment. The only thing I can ask is, has anything caused you uneasiness this term? Any incident? Or any person?"

Miss Bulstrode was silent for a moment or two. Then she said slowly:

"The answer, literally, is: I don't know."

Adam said quickly:

"You've got a feeling that something's wrong?"

"Yes—just that. It's not definite. I can't put my finger on any person, or any incident—unless—"

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

"I feel—I felt at the time—that I'd missed something that I ought not to have missed. Let me explain."

She recited briefly the little incident of Mrs. Upjohn and the distressing and unexpected arrival of Lady Veronica.

Adam was interested.

"Let me get this clear, Miss Bulstrode. Mrs. Upjohn, looking out of the window, this front window that gives on the drive, recognized someone. There's nothing in that. You have over a hundred pupils and nothing is more likely than for Mrs. Upjohn to see some parent or relation that she knew. But you are definitely of the opinion that she was *astonished* to recognize that person—in fact, that it was someone whom she would *not* have expected to see at Meadowbank?"

"Yes, that was exactly the impression I got."

"And then through the window looking in the opposite direction you saw one of the pupils' mother, in a state of intoxication, and that completely distracted your mind from what Mrs. Upjohn was saying?"

Miss Bulstrode nodded.

"She was talking for some minutes?"

"Yes."

"And when your attention did return to her, she was speaking of espionage, of Intelligence work she had done in the war before she married?"

"Yes."

"It might tie up," said Adam thoughtfully. "Someone she had known in her war days. A parent or relation of one of your pupils, or it could have been a member of your teaching staff."

"Hardly a member of my staff," objected Miss Bulstrode.

"It's possible."

"We'd better get in touch with Mrs. Upjohn," said Kelsey. "As soon as possible. You have her address, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Of course. But I believe she is abroad at the moment. Wait—I will find out."

She pressed her desk buzzer twice, then went impatiently to the door and called to a girl who was passing.

"Find Julia Upjohn for me, will you, Paula?"

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode."

"I'd better go before the girl comes," Adam said. "It wouldn't be natural for me to assist at the inquiries the Inspector is making. Ostensibly he's called me in here to get the low-down on me. Having satisfied himself that he's got nothing on me for the moment, he now tells me to take myself off."

"Take yourself off and remember I've got my eye on you!" growled Kelsey with a grin.

"By the way," said Adam addressing Miss Bulstrode as he paused by the door. "Will it be all right with you if I slightly abuse my position here? If I get, shall we say, a little too friendly with some members of your staff?"

"With which members of my staff?"

"Well—Mademoiselle Blanche, for instance."

"Mademoiselle Blanche? You think that she—"

"I think she's rather bored here."

"Ah!" Miss Bulstrode looked rather grim. "Perhaps you're right. Anyone else?"

"I shall have a good try all round," said Adam cheerfully. "If you should find that some of your girls are being rather silly, and slipping off to assignations in the garden, please believe that my intentions are strictly sleuthial—if there is such a word."

"You think the girls are likely to know something?"

"Everybody always knows something," said Adam, "even if it's something they don't know they know."

"You may be right."

There was a knock on the door, and Miss Bulstrode called "Come in."

Julia Upjohn appeared, very much out of breath.

"Come in, Julia."

Inspector Kelsey growled.

"You can go now, Goodman. Take yourself off and get on with your work."

"I've told you I don't know a thing about anything," said Adam sulkily. He went out, muttering "Blooming Gestapo."

"I'm sorry I'm so out of breath, Miss Bulstrode," apologized Julia. "I've run all the way from the tennis courts."

"That's quite all right. I just wanted to ask you your mother's address—that is, where I can get in touch with her?"

"Oh! You'll have to write to Aunt Isabel. Mother's abroad."

"I have your aunt's address. But I need to get in touch with your mother personally."

"I don't see how you can," said Julia, frowning. "Mother's gone to Anatolia on a bus."

"On a *bus?*" said Miss Bulstrode, taken aback.

Julia nodded vigorously.

"She likes that sort of thing," she explained. "And of course it's frightfully cheap. A bit uncomfortable, but Mummy doesn't mind that. Roughly, I should think she'd fetch up in Van in about three weeks or so."

"I see—yes. Tell me, Julia, did your mother ever mention to you seeing someone here whom she'd known in her war service days?"

"No, Miss Bulstrode, I don't think so. No, I'm sure she didn't."

"Your mother did Intelligence work, didn't she?"

"Oh, yes. Mummy seems to have loved it. Not that it sounds really exciting to me. She never blew up anything. Or got caught by the Gestapo. Or had her toenails pulled out. Or anything like that. She worked in Switzerland, I think—or was it Portugal?"

Julia added apologetically: "One gets rather bored with all that old war stuff; and I'm afraid I don't always listen properly."

"Well, thank you, Julia. That's all."

"Really!" said Miss Bulstrode, when Julia had departed. "Gone to Anatolia on a bus! The child said it exactly as though she were saying her mother had taken a 73 bus to Marshall and Snelgrove's."

ii

Jennifer walked away from the tennis courts rather moodily, swishing her racquet. The amount of double faults she had served this morning depressed her. Not, of course, that you could get a hard serve with this racquet, anyway. But she seemed to have lost control of her service lately. Her backhand, however, had definitely improved. Springer's coaching had been helpful. In many ways it was a pity that Springer was dead.

Jennifer took tennis very seriously. It was one of the things she thought about.

"Excuse me—"

Jennifer looked up, startled. A well dressed woman with golden hair, carrying a long flat parcel was standing a few feet away from her on the path. Jennifer wondered why on earth she hadn't seen the woman coming along toward her before. It did not occur to her that the woman might have been hidden behind a tree or in the rhododendron bushes and just stepped out of them. Such an idea would not have occurred to Jennifer, since why should a woman hide behind rhododendron bushes and suddenly step out of them?

Speaking with a slightly American accent the woman said, "I wonder if you could tell me where I could find a girl called"—she consulted a piece of paper—"Jennifer Sutcliffe."

Jennifer was surprised.

"I'm Jennifer Sutcliffe."

"Why! How ridiculous! That *is* a coincidence. That in a big school like this I should be looking for one girl and I should happen upon the girl herself to ask. And they say things like that don't happen."

"I suppose they do happen sometimes," said Jennifer, uninterested.

"I was coming down to lunch today with some friends down here," went on the woman, "and at a cocktail party yesterday I happened to mention I was coming, and your aunt—or was it your godmother?—I've got such a terrible memory. She told me her name and I've forgotten that too. But anyway, she said could I possibly call here and leave a new tennis racquet for you. She said you had been asking for one."

Jennifer's face lit up. It seemed like a miracle, nothing less.

"It must have been my godmother, Mrs. Campbell. I call her Aunt Gina. It wouldn't have been Aunt Rosamond. She never gives me anything but a mingey ten shillings at Christmas."

"Yes, I remember now. That *was* the name. Campbell."

The parcel was held out. Jennifer took it eagerly. It was quite loosely wrapped. Jennifer uttered an exclamation of pleasure as the racquet emerged from its coverings.

"Oh, it's smashing!" she exclaimed. "A really *good* one. I've been longing for a new racquet. You can't play decently if you haven't got a decent racquet."

"Why I guess that's so."

"Thank you very much for bringing it," said Jennifer gratefully.

"It was really no trouble. Only I confess I felt a little shy. Schools always make me feel shy. So many girls. Oh, by the way, I was asked to bring back your old racquet with me."

She picked up the racquet Jennifer had dropped.

"Your aunt—no—godmother—said she would have it restrung. It needs it badly, doesn't it?"

"I don't think that it's really worth while," said Jennifer, but without paying much attention.

She was still experimenting with the swing and balance of her new treasure.

"But an extra racquet is always useful," said her new friend. "Oh, dear," she ganced at her watch. "It is much later than I thought. I must run."

"Have you—do you want a taxi? I could telephone—"

"No, thank you, dear. My car is right by the gate. I left it there so that I shouldn't have to turn in a narrow space. Goodby. So pleased to have met you. I hope you enjoy the racquet."

She literally ran along the path toward the gate. Jennifer called after her once more. "Thank you *very* much."

Then, gloating, she went in search of Julia.

"Look." She flourished the racquet dramatically.

"I say! Where did you get that?"

"My godmother sent it to me. Aunt Gina. She's not my aunt, but I call her that. She's frightfully rich. I expect Mummy told her about me grumbling about my racquet. It *is* smashing, isn't it? I *must* remember to write and thank her."

"I should hope so!" said Julia virtuously.

"Well, you know how one does forget things sometimes. Even things you really mean to do. Look, Shaista," she added as the latter girl came toward them. "I've got a new racquet. Isn't it a beauty?"

"It must have been very expensive," said Shaista scanning it respectfully. "I wish I could play tennis well."

"You always run into the ball."

"I never seem to know where the ball is going to come," said Shaista vaguely. "Before I go home, I must have some really good shorts made in London. Or a tennis dress like the American champion Ruth Allen wears. I think that is very smart. Perhaps I will have both," she smiled in pleasurable anticipation.

"Shaista never thinks of anything except things to wear," said Julia scornfully as the two friends passed on. "Do you think *we* shall ever be like that?"

"I suppose so," said Jennifer gloomily. "It will be an awful bore."

They entered the Sports Pavilion, now officially vacated by the police, and Jennifer put her racquet carefully into her press.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said, stroking it affectionately.

"What have you done with the old one?"

"Oh, she took it."

"Who?"

"The woman who brought this. She'd met Aunt Gina at a cocktail party, and Aunt Gina asked her to bring me this as she was coming down here today, and Aunt Gina said to bring up my old one and she'd have it restrung."

"Oh, I see . . ." But Julia was frowning.

"What did Bully want with you?" asked Jennifer.

"Bully? Oh, nothing really. Just Mummy's address. But she hasn't got one because she's on a bus. In Turkey somewhere. Jennifer—look here. Your racquet didn't *need* restringing."

"Oh, it did, Julia. It was like a sponge."

"I know. But it's *my* racquet really. I mean, we exchanged. It was *my* racquet that needed restringing. Yours, the one I've got now, *was* restrung. You said yourself your mother had had it restrung before you went abroad."

"Yes, that's true." Jennifer looked a little startled. "Oh, well, I suppose this woman—whoever she was—I ought to have asked her name, but I was so entranced—just saw that it needed restringing."

"But you said that *she* said that it was your *Aunt Gina* who had said it needed restringing. And your Aunt Gina couldn't have thought it needed restringing if it didn't."

"Oh, well—" Jennifer looked impatient. "I suppose—I suppose—"

"You suppose what?"

"Perhaps Aunt Gina just thought that *if* I wanted a new racquet, it was because the old one wanted restringing. Anyway what does it matter?"

"I suppose it doesn't matter," said Julia slowly. "But I do think it's odd, Jennifer. It's like—like new lamps for old. Aladdin, you know."

Jennifer giggled.

"Fancy rubbing my old racquet—your old racquet, I mean, and having a genie appear! If you rubbed a lamp and a genie did appear, what would you ask him for, Julia?"

"Lots of things," breathed Julia ecstatically. "A tape recorder, and an Alsatian—or perhaps a Great Dane, and a hundred thousand pounds, and a black satin party frock, and oh! lots of other things. What would you?"

"I don't really know," said Jennifer. "Now I've got this smashing new racquet, I don't really want anything else."

CHAPTER XIII

CATASTROPHE

THE THIRD WEEK END after the opening of term followed the usual plan. It was the first week end on which parents were allowed to take pupils out. As a result Meadowbank was left almost deserted.

On this particular Sunday there would only be twenty girls left at the school itself for the midday meal. Some of the staff had week-end leave, returning late Sunday night or early Monday morning. On this particular occasion Miss Bulstrode herself was proposing to be absent for the week end. This was unusual since it was not her habit to leave the school during term time. But she had her reasons. She was going to stay with the Duchess of Welsham at Welsington Abbey. The Duchess had made a special point of it and had added that Henry Banks would be there. Henry Banks was the Chairman of the Governors. He was an important industrialist and he had been one of the original backers of the school. The invitation was therefore almost in the nature of a command. Not that Miss Bulstrode would have allowed herself to be commanded if she had not wished to do so. But as it happened, she welcomed the invitation gladly. She was by no means indifferent to duchesses and the Duchess of Welsham was an influential duchess, whose own daughters had been sent to Meadowbank. She was also particularly glad to have the opportunity of talking to Henry Banks on the subject of the school's future and also to put forward her own account of the recent tragic occurrence.

Owing to the influential connections at Meadowbank the murder of Miss Springer had been played down very tactfully in the press. It had become a sad fatality rather than a mysterious murder. The impression was given, though not said, that possibly some young thugs had broken into the Sports Pavilion and that Miss Springer's death had been more accident than design. It was reported vaguely that several young men had been asked to come to the police station and "assist the police." Miss Bulstrode herself was anxious to mitigate any unpleasant impression that might have been given to these two influential patrons of the school. She knew that they wanted to discuss the veiled hint that she had thrown out, of her coming retirement. Both the duchess and Henry Banks were anxious to persuade her to remain on. Now was the time, Miss Bulstrode felt, to push the claims of Eleanor Vansittart, to point out what a splendid person she was, and how well fitted to carry on the traditions of Meadowbank.

On Saturday morning Miss Bulstrode was just finishing off her correspondence with Ann Shapland when the telephone rang. Ann answered it.

"It's the Emir Ibrahim, Miss Bulstrode. He's arrived at Claridge's and would like to take Shaista out tomorrow."

Miss Bulstrode took the receiver from her and had a brief conversation with the Emir's equerry. Shaista would be ready any time from eleven-thirty onward on Sunday morning, she said. The girl must be back at the school by 8 P.M.

She rang off and said:

"I wish Orientals sometimes gave you a little more warning. It has been arranged for Shaista to go out with Giselle d'Aubray tomorrow. Now that will have to be cancelled. Have we finished all the letters?"

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode."

"Good, then I can go off with a clear conscience. Type them and send them off, and then you, too, are free for the week end. I shan't want you until lunchtime on Monday."

"Thank you, Miss Bulstrode."

"Enjoy yourself, my dear."

"I'm going to," said Ann.

"Young man?"

"Well—yes." Ann coloured a little. "Nothing serious, though."

"Then there ought to be. If you're going to marry, don't leave it too late."

"Oh, this is only an old friend. Nothing exciting."

"Excitement," said Miss Bulstrode warningly, "isn't always a good foundation for married life. Send Miss Chadwick to me, will you?"

Miss Chadwick bustled in.

"The Emir Ibrahim, Shaista's uncle, is taking her out tomorrow, Chaddy. If he comes himself, tell him she is making good progress."

"She's not very bright," said Miss Chadwick.

"She's immature intellectually," agreed Miss Bulstrode. "But she has a remarkably mature mind in other ways. Sometimes, when you talk to her, she might be a woman of twenty-five. I suppose it's because of the sophisticated life she's led. Paris, Teheran, Cairo, Istanbul and all the rest of it. In this country we're inclined to keep our children too young. We account it a merit when we say: 'She's still quite a child.' It isn't a merit. It's a grave handicap in life."

"I don't know that I quite agree with you there, dear," said Miss Chadwick. "I'll go now and tell Shaista about her uncle. You go away for your week end and don't worry about anything."

"Oh! I shan't," said Miss Bulstrode. "It's a good opportunity, really, for leaving Eleanor Vansittart in charge and seeing how she shapes. With you and her in charge nothing's likely to go wrong."

"I hope not, indeed. I'll go and find Shaista."

Shaista looked surprised and not at all pleased to hear that her uncle had arrived in London.

"He wants to take me out tomorrow?" she grumbled. "But, Miss Chadwick, it is all arranged that I go out with Giselle d'Aubray and her mother."

"I'm afraid you'll have to do that another time."

"But I would much rather go out with Giselle," said Shaista crossly. "My uncle is not at all amusing. He eats and then he grunts and it is all very dull."

"You mustn't talk like that. It is impolite," said Miss Chadwick. "Your uncle is only in England for a week, I understand, and naturally he wants to see you."

"Perhaps he has arranged a new marriage for me," said Shaista, her face brightening. "If so, that would be fun."

"If that is so, he will no doubt tell you so. But you are too young to get married yet awhile. You must first finish your education."

"Education is very boring," said Shaista.

ii

Sunday morning dawned bright and serene—Miss Shapland had departed soon after Miss Bulstrode on Saturday. Miss Johnson, Miss Rich, and Miss Blake left on Sunday morning.

Miss Vansittart, Miss Chadwick, Miss Rowan and Mademoiselle Blanche were left in charge.

"I hope all the girls won't talk too much," said Miss Chadwick dubiously. "About poor Miss Springer I mean."

"Let us hope," said Eleanor Vansittart, "that the whole affair will soon be forgotten." She added: "If any parents talk to *me* about it, I shall discourage them. It will be best, I think, to take quite a firm line."

The girls went to church at ten o'clock accompanied by Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick. Four girls who were Roman Catholics were escorted by Angele Blanche to a rival religious establishment. Then, about half past eleven, the cars began to roll into the drive. Miss Vansittart, graceful, poised and dignified stood in the hall. She greeted mothers smilingly, produced their offspring and adroitly turned aside any unwanted references to the recent tragedy.

"Terrible," she said, "yes, quite terrible, but, you do understand, *we don't talk about it here.* All these young minds—such a pity for them to dwell on it."

Chaddy was also on the spot greeting old friends among the parents, discussing plans for the holidays and speaking affectionately of the various daughters.

"I do think Aunt Isabel might have come and taken *me* out," said Julia, who with Jennifer was standing with her nose pressed against the window of one of the classrooms, watching the comings and goings on the drive outside.

"Mummy's going to take me out next week end," said Jennifer. "Daddy's got some important people coming down this week end so she couldn't come today."

"There goes Shaista," said Julia, "all togged up for London. Oo-ee! Just look at the heels on her shoes. I bet old Johnson doesn't like those shoes."

A liveried chauffeur was opening the door of a large Cadillac. Shaista climbed in and was driven away.

"You can come out with me next week end, if you like," said Jennifer. "I told Mummy I'd got a friend I wanted to bring."

"I'd love to," said Julia. "Look at Vansittart doing her stuff."

"Terribly gracious, isn't she?" said Jennifer.

"I don't know why," said Julia, "but somehow it makes me want to laugh. It's a sort of copy of Miss Bulstrode, isn't it? Quite a good copy, but it's rather like Joyce Grenfell or someone doing an imitation."

"There's Pam's mother," said Jennifer. "She's brought the little boys. How they can all get into that tiny Morris Minor I don't know."

"They're going to have a picnic," said Julia. "Look at all the baskets."

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" asked Jennifer. "I don't think I need write to Mummy this week, do you, if I'm going to see her next week?"

"You are slack about writing letters, Jennifer."

"I never can think of anything to say," said Jennifer.

"I can," said Julia, "I can think of lots to say." She added mournfully, "But there isn't really anyone much to write to at present."

"What about your mother?"

"I told you she's gone to Anatolia in a bus. You can't write letters to people who go to Anatolia in buses. At least you can't write to them all the time."

"Where do you write to when you do write?"

"Oh, consulates here and there. She left me a list. Stamboul is the first and then Ankara and then some funny name." She added, "I wonder why Bully wanted to get in touch with Mummy so badly? She seemed quite upset when I said where she'd gone."

"It can't be about you," said Jennifer. "You haven't done anything awful, have you?"

"Not that I know of," said Julia. "Perhaps she wanted to tell her about Springer."

"Why should she?" said Jennifer. "I should think she'd be jolly glad that there's at least one mother who *doesn't* know about Springer."

"You mean mothers might think that their daughters were going to get murdered too?"

"I don't think my mother's quite as bad as that," said Jennifer. "But she did get in quite a flap about it."

"If you ask me," said Julia, in a meditative manner, "I think there's a lot that they haven't told us about Springer."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, funny things seem to be happening. Like your new tennis racquet."

"Oh, I meant to tell you," said Jennifer, "I wrote and thanked Aunt Gina and this morning I got a letter from her saying she was very glad I'd got a new racquet but that she never sent it to me."

"I told you that racquet business was peculiar," said Julia triumphantly, "and you had a burglary, too, at your home, didn't you?"

"Yes, but they didn't take anything."

"That makes it even more interesting," said Julia. "I think," she added thoughtfully, "that we shall probably have a second murder soon."

"Oh, really, Julia, why should we have a second murder?"

"Well, there's usually a second murder in books," said Julia. "What I think is, Jennifer, that you'll have to be frightfully careful that it isn't *you* who gets murdered."

"Me?" said Jennifer, surprised. "Why should anyone murder me?"

"Because somehow you're mixed up in it all," said Julia. She added thoughtfully, "We must try and get a bit more out of your mother next week, Jennifer. Perhaps somebody gave her some secret papers out in Ramat."

"What sort of secret papers?"

"Oh, how should I know," said Julia. "Plans or formulas for a new atomic bomb. That sort of thing."

Jennifer looked unconvinced.

iii

Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick were in the Common Room when Miss Rowan entered and said:

"Where is Shaista? I can't find her anywhere. The Emir's car has just arrived to call for her."

"What?" Chaddy looked up surprised. "There must be some mistake. The Emir's car came for her about three quarters of an hour ago. I saw her get into it and drive off myself. She was one of the first to go."

Eleanor Vansittart shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose a car must have been ordered twice over, or something," she said.

She went out herself and spoke to the chauffeur. "There must be some mistake," she said. "The young lady has already left for London three quarters of an hour ago."

The chauffeur seemed surprised. "I suppose there must be some mistake, if you say so, madam," he said. "I was definitely given instructions to call at Meadowbank for the young lady."

"I suppose there's bound to be a muddle sometimes," said Miss Vansittart.

The chauffeur seemed unperturbed and unsurprised. "Happens all the time," he said. "Telephone messages taken, written down, forgotten. All that sort of thing. But we pride ourselves in our firm that we *don't* make mistakes. Of course, if I may say so, you never know with these Oriental gentlemen. They've sometimes got quite a big entourage with them, and orders get given twice and even three times over. I expect that's what must have happened in this instance." He turned his large car with some adroitness and drove away.

Miss Vansittart looked a little doubtful for a moment or two, but she decided there was nothing to worry about and began to look forward with satisfaction to a peaceful afternoon.

After luncheon the few girls who remained wrote letters or wandered about the grounds. A certain amount of tennis was played and the swimming pool was well patronized. Miss Vansittart took her fountain pen and her writing pad to the shade of the cedar tree. When the telephone rang at half past four it was Miss Chadwick who answered it.

"Meadowbank School?" The voice of a well-bred young Englishman spoke. "Oh, is Miss Bulstrode there?"

"Miss Bulstrode's not here today. This is Miss Chadwick speaking."

"Oh, it's about one of your pupils. I am speaking from Claridge's, the Emir Ibrahim's suite."

"Oh, yes? You mean about Shaista?"

"Yes. The Emir is rather annoyed at not having got a message of any kind."

"A message? Why should he get a message?"

"Well, to say that Shaista couldn't come, or wasn't coming."

"Wasn't coming! Do you mean to say she hasn't arrived?"

"No, no, she's certainly not arrived. Did she leave Meadowbank then?"

"Yes. A car came for her this morning—oh, about half past eleven I should think, and she drove off."

"That's extraordinary because there's no sign of her here . . . I'd better ring up the firm that supplies the Emir's cars."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Chadwick, "I do hope there hasn't been an accident."

"Oh, don't let's assume the worst," said the young man cheerfully. "I think you'd have heard, you know, if there'd been an accident. Or we would. I shouldn't worry if I were you."

But Miss Chadwick did worry.

"It seems to me very odd," she said.

"I suppose—" The young man hesitated.

"Yes?" said Miss Chadwick.

"Well, it's not quite the sort of thing I want to suggest to the Emir, but just between you and me there's no—er—well, no boy friend hanging about, is there?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Chadwick with dignity.

"No, no, well I didn't think there would be, but, well one never knows with girls, does one? You'd be surprised at some of the things I've run into."

"I can assure you," said Miss Chadwick with dignity, "that anything of that kind is quite impossible."

But was it impossible? Did one ever know with girls?

She replaced the receiver and rather unwillingly went in search of Miss Vansittart. There was no reason to believe that Miss Vansittart would be any better able to deal with the situation than she herself but she felt the need of consulting with someone. Miss Vansittart said at once:

"The second car?"

They looked at each other.

"Do you think," said Chaddy slowly, "that we ought to report this to the police?"

"Not to the *police,*" said Eleanor Vansittart in a shocked voice.

"She did say, you know," said Chaddy, "that somebody might try to kidnap her."

"Kidnap her? Nonsense!" said Miss Vansittart sharply.

"You don't think—" Miss Chadwick was persistent.

"Miss Bulstrode left me in charge here," said Eleanor Vansittart, "and I shall certainly not sanction anything of the kind. We don't want any more trouble here with the police."

Miss Chadwick looked at her without affection. She thought Miss Vansittart was being short-sighted and foolish. She went back into the house and put through a call to the Duchess of Welsham's house. Unfortunately everyone was out.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS CHADWICK LIES AWAKE

Miss Chadwick was restless. She turned to and fro in her bed, counting sheep, and employing other time-honoured methods of invoking sleep. In vain.

At eight o'clock, when Shaista had not returned, and there had been no news of her, Miss Chadwick had taken matters into her own hands and rung up Inspector Kelsey. She was relieved to find that he did not take the matter too seriously. She could leave it all to him, he assured her. It would be an easy matter to check up on a possible accident. After that, he would get in touch with London. Everything would be done that was necessary. Perhaps the girl herself was playing truant. He advised Miss Chadwick to say as little as possible at the school. Let it be thought that Shaista was staying the night with her uncle at Claridge's.

"The last thing you want, or that Miss Bulstrode would want, is any more publicity," said Kelsey. "It's most unlikely that the girl has been kidnaped. So don't worry, Miss Chadwick. Leave it all to us."

But Miss Chadwick did worry.

Lying in bed, sleepless, her mind went from possible kidnaping back to murder.

Murder at Meadowbank. It was terrible! Unbelievable! *Meadowbank.* Miss Chadwick loved Meadowbank. She loved it, perhaps, even more than Miss Bulstrode did, though in a somewhat different way. It had been such a risky gallant enterprise. Following Miss Bulstrode faithfully into the hazardous undertaking, she had endured panic more than once. Supposing the whole thing should fail. They hadn't really had much capital. If they did not succeed—if their backing was withdrawn—Miss Chadwick had an anxious mind and could always tabulate innumerable ifs. Miss Bulstrode had enjoyed the adventure, the hazard of it all, but Chaddy had not. Sometimes, in an agony of apprehension, she had pleaded for Meadowbank to be run on more conventional lines. It would be *safer,* she urged. But Miss Bulstrode had been uninterested in safety. She had her vision of what a school should be and she had pursued it unafraid. And she had been justified in her audacity. But oh, the relief to Chaddy when success was a *fait accompli.* When Meadowbank was established, safely established, as a great English institution. It was then that her love for Meadowbank had flowed most fully. Doubts, fears, anxieties, all slipped from her. Peace and prosperity had come. She basked in the prosperity of Meadowbank like a purring tabby cat.

She had been quite upset when Miss Bulstrode had first begun to talk of retirement. Retire *now*—when everything was set fair? What madness! Miss Bulstrode talked of travel, of all the things in the world to see. Chaddy was unimpressed. Nothing, anywhere, could be half as good as Meadowbank! It had seemed to her that nothing could affect the well being of Meadowbank. But now—murder!

Such an ugly violent word—coming in from the outside world like an ill-mannered storm wind. Murder—a word associated by Miss Chadwick only with delinquent boys with flick knives, or evil-minded doctors poisoning their wives. But murder here—at a school—and not any school—at Meadowbank. Incredible.

Really, Miss Springer—poor Miss Springer, naturally it wasn't her fault—but, illogically, Chaddy felt that it must have been her fault in some way. She didn't know the traditions of Meadowbank. A tactless woman. She must in some way have invited murder. Miss Chadwick rolled over, turned her pillow, said, "I mustn't go on thinking of it all. Perhaps I had better get up and take some aspirin. I'll just try counting to fifty . . ."

Before she had got to fifty, her mind was off again on the same track. Worrying. Would all this—and perhaps kidnaping too—get into the papers? Would parents, reading, hasten to take their daughters away . . .

Oh, dear, she *must* calm down and go to sleep. What time was it? She switched on her light and looked at her watch. Just after a quarter to one. Just about the time that poor Miss Springer . . . No, she would *not* think of it any more. And, how stupid of Miss Springer to have gone off by herself like that without waking up somebody else.

"Oh, dear," said Miss Chadwick. "I'll have to take some aspirin."

She got out of bed and went over to the washstand. She took two aspirins with a drink of water. On her way back, she pulled aside the curtain of the window and peered out. She did so to reassure herself more than for any other reason. She wanted to feel that of course there would never again be a light in the Sports Pavilion in the middle of the night . . .

But there was.

In a minute Chaddy had leapt to action. She thrust her feet into stout shoes, pulled on a thick coat, picked up her own flashlight and rushed out of her room and down the stairs. She had blamed Miss Springer for not obtaining support before going out to investigate, but it never occurred to her to do so. She was only eager to get out to the Pavilion and find out who the intruder was. She did pause to pick up a weapon—not perhaps a very good one, but a weapon of kinds, and then she was out of the side door and following quickly along the path through the shrubbery. She was out of breath, but completely resolute. Only when she got at last to the door, did she slacken up and take care to move softly. The door was slightly ajar. She pushed it further open and looked in . . .

ii

At about the time when Miss Chadwick was rising from bed in search of aspirin, Ann Shapland, looking very attractive in a black dance frock, was sitting at a table in Le Nid Sauvage eating supreme of chicken and smiling at the young man opposite her. Dear Denis, thought Ann to herself, always so exactly the same. It is what I simply couldn't bear if I married him. He is rather a pet, all the same. Aloud she remarked:

"What fun this is, Denis. Such a glorious *change.*"

"How is the new job?" said Denis.

"Well, actually, I'm rather enjoying it."

"Doesn't seem to me quite your sort of thing."

Ann laughed. "I'd be hard put to it to say what is my sort of thing. I like variety, Denis."

"I never can see why you gave up your job with old Sir Mervyn Todhunter."

"Well, chiefly because of Sir Mervyn Todhunter. The attention he bestowed on me was beginning to annoy his wife. And it's part of my policy never to annoy wives. They can do you a lot of harm, you know."

"Jealous cats," said Denis.

"Oh, no, not really," said Ann. "I'm rather on the wives' side. Anyway I liked Lady Todhunter much better than old Mervyn. Why are you surprised at my present job?"

"Oh, a school. You're not scholastically minded at all, I should have said."

"I'd hate to *teach* in a school. I'd hate to be penned up. Herded with a lot of women. But the work as the secretary of a school like Meadowbank is rather fun. It really is a unique place, you know. And Miss Bulstrode's unique. She's really something, I can tell you. Her steel-grey eye goes through you and sees your innermost secrets. And she keeps you on your toes. I'd hate to make a mistake in any letters I'd taken down for her. Oh, yes, she's certainly something."

"I wish you'd get tired of all these jobs," said Denis. "It's quite time, you know, Ann, that you stopped all this racketing about with jobs here and jobs there and—and settled down."

"You are sweet, Denis," said Ann in a noncommittal manner.

"We could have quite fun, you know," said Denis.

"I daresay," said Ann, "but I'm not ready yet. And anyway, you know, there's my mamma."

"Yes, I was—going to talk to you about that."

"About my mamma? What were you going to say?"

"Well, Ann, you know I think you're wonderful. The way you get an interesting job and then you chuck it all up and go home to her."

"Well, I have to now and again when she gets a really bad attack."

"I know. As I say, I think it's wonderful of you. But all the same there are places, you know, very good places nowadays where—where people like your mother are well looked after and all that sort of thing. Not really loony bins."

"And which cost the earth," said Ann.

"No, no, not necessarily. Why, even under the Health Scheme . . ."

A bitter note crept into Ann's voice. "Yes, I daresay it will come to that one day. But in the meantime I've got a nice old pussy who lives with Mother and who can cope normally. Mother is quite reasonable most of the time. And when she—isn't, I come back and lend a hand."

"She's—she isn't—she's never—"

"Are you going to say violent, Denis? You've got an extraordinarily lurid imagination. No. My dear mamma is *never* violent. She just gets fuddled. She forgets where she is and who she is and wants to go for long walks, and then as like as not she'll jump into a train or a bus and take off somewhere and—well, it's all very difficult, you see. Sometimes it's too much for one person to cope with. But she's quite happy, even when she is fuddled. And sometimes quite funny about it. I remember her saying: 'Ann, darling, it really is very embarrassing. I knew I was going to Tibet and there I was sitting in that hotel in Dover with no idea how to get there. Then I thought why was I going to Tibet? And I thought I'd better come home. Then I couldn't remember how long ago it was when I left home. It makes it very embarrassing, dear, when you can't quite remember things.' Mummy was really very funny over it all, you know. I mean she quite sees the humorous side herself."

"I've never actually met her," Denis began.

"I don't encourage people to meet her," said Ann. "That's the one thing I think you *can* do for your own people. Protect them from—well, curiosity and pity."

"It's not curiosity, Ann."

"No, I don't think it would be with you. But it would be pity. I don't want that."

"I can see what you mean."

"But if you think I mind giving up jobs from time to time and going home for an indefinite period, I don't," said Ann. "I never meant to get embroiled in anything too deeply. Not even when I took my first post after my secretarial training. I thought the thing was to get really good at the job. Then if you're really good you can pick and choose your posts. You see different places and you see different kinds of life. At the moment I'm seeing school life. The best school in England seen from within! I shall stay there, I expect, about a year and a half."

"You never really get caught up in things, do you, Ann?"

"No," said Ann thoughtfully. "I don't think I do. I think I'm one of those people who are a born observer. More like a commentator on the radio."

"You're so detached," said Denis gloomily. "You don't really care about anything or anyone."

"I expect I shall some day," said Ann encouragingly.

"I do understand more or less how you're thinking and feeling."

"I doubt it," said Ann.

"Anyway, I don't think you'll last a year. You'll get fed up with all those women," said Denis.

"There's a very good-looking gardener," said Ann. She laughed when she saw Denis' expression. "Cheer up, I'm only trying to make you jealous."

"What's this about one of the mistresses having been killed?"

"Oh, that." Ann's face became serious and thoughtful. "That's odd, Denis. Very odd indeed. It was the games mistress. You know the type. I-am-a-plain-games-mistress. I think there's a lot more behind it than has come out yet."

"Well, don't you get mixed up in anything unpleasant."

"That's easy to say. I've never had any chance at displaying my talents as a sleuth. I think I *might* be rather good at it."

"Now, Ann."

"Darling, I'm not going to trail dangerous criminals. I'm just going to—well, make a few logical deductions. Why and who. And what for? That sort of thing. I've come across one piece of information that's rather interesting."

"Ann!"

"Don't look so agonized. Only it doesn't seem to link up with anything," said Ann thoughtfully. "Up to a point it all fits in very well. And then, suddenly, it doesn't." She added cheerfully, "Perhaps there'll be a second murder, and that will clarify things a little."

It was at exactly that moment that Miss Chadwick pushed open the Sports Pavilion door.

CHAPTER XV

MURDER REPEATS ITSELF

"Come Along," said Inspector Kelsey, entering the room with a grim face. "There's been another."

"Another what?" Adam looked up sharply.

"Another murder," said Inspector Kelsey. He led the way out of the room and Adam followed him. They had been sitting in the latter's room drinking beer and discussing various probabilities when Kelsey had been summoned to the telephone.

"Who is it?" demanded Adam, as he followed Inspector Kelsey down the stairs.

"Another mistress—Miss Vansittart."

"Where?"

"In the Sports Pavilion."

"The Sports Pavilion again?" said Adam. "What is there about this Sports Pavilion?"

"You'd better give it the once-over this time," said Inspector Kelsey. "Perhaps your technique of searching may be more successful than ours has been. There must be *something* about that Sports Pavilion or why should everyone get killed there?"

He and Adam got into his car. "I expect the doctor will be there ahead of us. He hasn't so far to go."

It was, Kelsey thought, like a bad dream repeating itself, as he entered the brilliantly lighted Sports Pavilion. There, once again, was a body with the doctor kneeling beside it. Once again the doctor rose from his knees and got up.

"Killed about half an hour ago," he said. "Forty minutes at most."

"Who found her?" said Kelsey.

One of his men spoke up. "Miss Chadwick."

"That's the old one, isn't it?"

"Yes. She saw a light, came out here, and found her dead. She stumbled back to the house and more or less went into hysteries. It was the matron who telephoned, Miss Johnson."

"Right," said Kelsey. "How was she killed? Shot again?"

The doctor shook his head. "No. Slugged on the back of the head, this time. Might have been a cosh or a sandbag. Something of that kind."

A golf club with a steel head was lying near the door. It was the only thing that looked remotely disorderly in the place.

"What about that?" said Kelsey, pointing. "Could she have been hit with that?"

The doctor shook his head. "Impossible. There's no mark on her. No, it was definitely a heavy rubber cosh or a sandbag, something of that sort."

"Something—professional?"

"Probably, yes. Whoever it was, didn't mean to make any noise this time. Came up behind her and slugged her on the back of the head. She fell forward and probably never knew what hit her."

"What was she doing?"

"She was probably kneeling down," said the doctor. "Kneeling in front of this locker."

The Inspector went to the locker and looked at it. "That's the girl's name on it, I presume," he said. "Shaista—let me see, that's the—that's the Egyptian girl, isn't it? Her Highness Princess Shaista." He turned to Adam. "It seems to tie in, doesn't it? Wait a minute—that's the girl they reported this evening as missing?"

"That's right, sir," said the sergeant. "A car called for her here, supposed to have been sent by her uncle who's staying at Claridge's in London. She got into it and drove off."

"No reports came in?"

"Not as yet, sir. Got a network out. And the Yard is in on it."

"A nice simple way of kidnapping anyone," said Adam. "No struggle, no cries. All you've got to know, is that the girl's expecting a car to fetch her and all you're got to do is look like a high-class chauffeur and arrive there before the other car does. The girl will step in without a second thought and you can drive off without her suspecting in the least what's happening to her."

"No abandoned car found anywhere?" asked Kelsey.

"We've had no news of one," said the sergeant. "The Yard's on it now as I said," he added, "and the Special Branch."

"May mean a bit of a political schemozzle," said the Inspector. "I don't suppose for a minute they'll be able to take her out of the country."

"What do they want to kidnap her for anyway?" asked the doctor.

"Goodness knows," said Kelsey gloomily. "She told me she was afraid of being kidnaped and I'm ashamed to say I thought she was just showing off."

"I thought so, too, when you told me about it," said Adam.

"The trouble is we don't know enough," said Kelsey. "There are far too many loose ends." He looked around. "Well, there doesn't seem to be anything more that I can do here. Get on with the usual stuff—photographs, fingerprints, etc. I'd better go along to the house."

At the house he was received by Miss Johnson. She was shaken but preserved her self-control.

"It's terrible, Inspector," she said. "Two of our mistresses killed. Poor Miss Chadwick's in a dreadful state."

"I'd like to see her as soon as I can."

"The doctor gave her something and she's much calmer now. Shall I take you to her?"

"Yes, in a minute or two. First of all, just tell me what you can about the last time you saw Miss Vansittart."

"I haven't seen her at all today," said Miss Johnson. "I've been away all day. I arrived back here just before eleven and went straight up to my room. I went to bed."

"You didn't happen to look out of your window toward the Sports Pavilion?"

"No. No, I never thought of it. I'd spent the day with my sister whom I hadn't seen for some time and my mind was full of home news. I took a bath and went to bed and read a book, and I turned off the light and went to sleep. The next thing I knew was when Miss Chadwick burst in, looking as white as a sheet and shaking all over."

"Was Miss Vansittart absent today?"

"No, she was here. She was in charge. Miss Bulstrode's away."

"Who else was here?—of the mistresses, I mean."

Miss Johnson considered a moment. "Miss Vansittart, Miss Chadwick, the French mistress, Mademoiselle Blanche, Miss Rowan."

"I see. Well, I think you'd better take me to Miss Chadwick now."

Miss Chadwick was sitting in a chair in her room. Although the night was a warm one the electric fire had been turned on and a rug was wrapped round her knees. She turned a ghastly face toward Inspector Kelsey.

"She's dead—she *is* dead? There's no chance that—that she might come round?"

Kelsey shook his head slowly.

"It's so awful," said Miss Chadwick, "with Miss Bulstrode away." She burst into tears. "This will ruin the school," she said. "This will ruin Meadowbank. I can't bear it—I really can't bear it."

Kelsey sat down beside her. "I know," he said sympathetically, "I know. It's been a terrible shock to you, but I want you to be brave, Miss Chadwick, and tell me all you know. The sooner we can find out who did it, the less trouble and publicity there will be."

"Yes, yes, I can see that. You see, I—I went to bed early because I thought it would be nice for once to have a nice long night. But I couldn't go to sleep. I was worrying."

"Worrying about the school?"

"Yes. And about Shaista being missing. And then I began thinking of Miss Springer and whether—whether her murder would affect the parents, and whether perhaps they wouldn't send their girls back here next term. I was so terribly upset for Miss Bulstrode. I mean, she's *made* this place. It's been such a fine achievement."

"I know. Now go on telling me—you were worried, and you couldn't sleep?"

"No, I counted sheep and everything. And then I got up and took some aspirin and when I'd taken it I just happened to draw back the curtains from the window. I don't quite know why. I suppose because I'd been thinking about Miss Springer. Then you see, I saw—I saw a light there."

"What kind of a light?"

"Well, a sort of dancing light. I mean—I think it must have been a flashlight. It was just like the light that Miss Johnson and I saw before."

"It was just the same, was it?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so. Perhaps a little feebler, but I don't know."

"Yes. And then?"

"And then," said Miss Chadwick, her voice suddenly becoming more resonant, "I was determined that *this* time I would see who it was out there and what they were doing. So I got up and pulled on my coat and my shoes, and I rushed out of the house."

"You didn't think of calling anyone else?"

"No. No, I didn't. You see I was in such a hurry to get there. I was so afraid the person—whoever it was—would go away."

"Yes. Go on, Miss Chadwick."

"So I went as fast as I could. I went up to the door and just before I got there I went on tiptoe so that—so that I should be able to look in and nobody would hear me coming. I got there. The door was not shut—just ajar and I pushed it very slightly open. I looked round it and—and there she was. Fallen forward on her face, *dead* . . ."

She began to shake all over.

"Yes, yes, Miss Chadwick, it's all right. By the way, there was a golf club out there. Did you take it out? Or did Miss Vansittart?"

"A golf club?" said Miss Chadwick vaguely. "I can't remember. Oh, yes, I think I picked it up in the hall. I took it out with me in case—well, in case I should have to use it. When I saw Eleanor I suppose I just dropped it. Then I got back to the house somehow and I found Miss Johnson. Oh! I can't bear it. I can't bear it—this will be the end of Meadowbank—"

Miss Chadwick's voice rose hysterically. Miss Johnson came forward.

"To discover two murders is too much of a strain for anyone," said Miss Johnson. "Certainly for anyone her age. You don't want to ask her any more, do you?"

Inspector Kelsey shook his head.

As he was going downstairs, he noticed a pile of old-fashioned sandbags with buckets in an above. Dating from the war, perhaps, but the uneasy thought occurred to him that it needn't have been a professional with a cosh who had slugged Miss Vansittart. Someone in the building, someone who hadn't wished to risk the sound of a shot a second time, and who, very likely, had disposed of the incriminating pistol after the last murder, could have helped themselves to an innocent looking but lethal weapon—and possibly even replaced it tidily afterward!

CHAPTER XVI

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPORTS PAVILION

"My head is bloody but unbowed," Adam said to himself.

He was looking at Miss Bulstrode. He had never, he thought, admired a woman more. She sat, cool and unmoved, with her lifework falling in ruins about her.

From time to time telephone calls came through announcing that yet another pupil was being removed.

Finally Miss Bulstrode had taken her decision. Excusing herself to the police officers, she summoned Ann Shapland, and dictated a brief statement. The school would be closed until the end of term. Parents who found it inconvenient to have their children home, were welcome to leave them in her care and their education would be continued.

"You've got the list of parents' names and addresses? And their telephone numbers?"

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode."

"Then start on the telephone. After that see a typed notice goes to everyone."

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode."

On her way out, Ann Shapland paused near the door.

She flushed and her words came with a rush.

"Excuse me, Miss Bulstrode. It's not my business—but isn't it a pity to —to be premature? I mean—after the first panic, when people have had time to think—surely they won't want to take the girls away. They'll be sensible and think better of it."

Miss Bulstrode looked at her keenly.

"You think I'm accepting defeat too easily?"

Ann flushed.

"I know—you think it's cheek. But—but, well then, yes, I do."

"You're a fighter, child, I'm glad to see. But you're quite wrong. I'm not accepting defeat. I'm going on my knowledge of human nature. Urge people to take their children away, force it on them—and they won't want to nearly so much. They'll think up reasons for letting them remain. Or at the worst they'll decide to let them come back next term—if there is a next term," she added grimly.

She looked at Inspector Kelsey.

"That's up to you," she said. "Clear these murders up—catch whoever is responsible for them—and we'll be all right."

Inspector Kelsey looked unhappy. He said: "We're doing our best."

Ann Shapland went out.

"Competent girl," said Miss Bulstrode. "And loyal."

This was in the nature of a parenthesis. She pressed her attack.

"Have you absolutely *no* idea of who killed two of my mistresses in the Sports Pavilion? You ought to, by this time. And this kidnapping on top of everything else. I blame myself there. The girl talked about someone wanting to kidnap her. I thought, God forgive me, she was making herself important. I see now that there must have been something behind it. Someone must have hinted, or warned—one doesn't know which—" She broke off, resuming: "You've no news of any kind?"

"Not yet. But I don't think you need worry too much about that. It's been passed to the C.I.D. The Special Branch is on to it, too. They ought to find her within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at most. There are advantages in this being an island. All the ports, airports, etc., are alerted. And the police in every district are keeping a look-out. It's actually easy enough to kidnap anyone—it's keeping them hidden that's the problem. Oh, we'll find her."

"I hope you'll find her alive," said Miss Bulstrode grimly. "We seem to be up against someone who isn't too scrupulous about human life."

"They wouldn't have troubled to kidnap her if they'd meant to do away with her," said Adam. "They could have done that here easily enough."

He felt that the last words were unfortunate. Miss Bulstrode gave him a look.

"So it seems," she said drily.

The telephone rang. Miss Bulstrode took up the receiver.

"Yes?"

She motioned to Inspector Kelsey.

"It's for you."

Adam and Miss Bulstrode watched him as he took the call. He grunted, jotted down a note or two, said finally: "I see. Alderton Priors. That's Wallshire. Yes, we'll cooperate. Yes, Super. I'll carry on here, then."

He put down the receiver and stayed a moment lost in thought. Then he looked up.

"His Excellency got a ransom note this morning. Typed on a new Corona. Postmark Portsmouth. Bet that's a blind."

"Where and how?" asked Adam.

"Crossroads two miles north of Alderton Priors. That's a bit of bare moorland. Envelope containing money to be put under stone behind Automobile Association box there at 2 A.M. tomorrow morning."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand." He shook his head. "Sounds amateurish to me."

"What are you going to do?" asked Miss Bulstrode.

Inspector Kelsey looked at her. He was a different man. Official reticence hung about him like a cloak.

"The responsibility isn't mine, madam," he said. "We have our methods."

"I hope they're successful," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Ought to be easy," said Adam.

"Amateurish?" said Miss Bulstrode, catching at a word they had used. "I wonder . . ."

Then she said sharply:

"What about my staff? What remains of it, that is to say. Do I trust them, or don't I?"

As Inspector Kelsey hesitated, she said:

"You're afraid that if you tell me who is *not* cleared, I should show it in my manner to them. You're wrong. I shouldn't."

"I don't think you would," said Kelsey. "But I can't afford to take any chances. It doesn't look, on the face of it, as though any of your staff *can* be the person we're looking for. That is, not so far as we've been able to check up on them. We've paid special attention to those who are new this term—that is Mademoiselle Blanche, Miss Springer and your secretary, Miss Shapland. Miss Shapland's past is completely corroborated. She's the daughter of a retired General, she has held the posts she says she did and her former employers vouch for her. In addition she has an alibi for last night. When Miss Vansittart was killed, Miss Shapland was with a Mr. Denis Rathbone at a night club. They're both well known there, and Mr. Rathbone has an excellent character. Mademoiselle Blanche's antecedents have also been checked. She has taught at a school in the north of England and at two schools in Germany, and has been given an excellent character. She is said to be a first-class teacher."

"Not by our standards," sniffed Miss Bulstrode.

"Her French background has also been checked. As regards Miss Springer, things are not quite so conclusive. She did her training where she says, but there have been gaps since in her periods of employment which are not fully accounted for.

"Since, however, she was killed," added the Inspector, "that seems to exonerate her."

"I agree," said Miss Bulstrode drily, "that both Miss Springer and Miss

Vansittart are *hors de combat* as suspects. Let us talk sense. Is Mademoiselle Blanche, in spite of her blameless background, still a suspect merely because she is still alive?"

"She *could* have done both the murders. She was here, in the building, last night," said Kelsey. "She *says* she went to bed early and slept and heard nothing until the alarm was given. There's no evidence to the contrary. We've got nothing against her. But Miss Chadwick says definitely that she's sly."

Miss Bulstrode waved that aside impatiently.

"Miss Chadwick always finds the French mistresses sly. She's got a thing about them." She looked at Adam. "What do *you* think?"

"I think she pries," said Adam slowly. "It may be just natural inquisitiveness. It may be something more. I can't make up my mind. She doesn't *look* to me like a killer, but how does one know?"

"That's just it," said Kelsey. "There *is* a killer here, a ruthless killer who has killed twice—but it's very hard to believe that it's one of the staff. Miss Johnson was with her sister last night at Limeston on Sea, and anyway she's been with you seven years. Miss Chadwick's been with you since you started. Both of them, anyway, are clear of Miss Springer's death. Miss Rich has been with you over a year and was staying last night at the Alton Grange Hotel, twenty miles away. Miss Blake was with friends at Littleport. Miss Rowan has been with you for a year and has a good background. As for your servants, frankly I can't see any of them as murderers. They're all local, too . . ."

Miss Bulstrode nodded pleasantly.

"I quite agree with your reasoning. It doesn't leave much, does it? So—" She paused and fixed an accusing eye on Adam. "It looks really—as though it must be *you."*

His mouth opened in astonishment.

"On the spot," she mused. "Free to come and go . . . Good story to account for your presence here. Background O.K., but you *could* be a double-crosser, you know."

Adam recovered himself.

"Really, Miss Bulstrode," he said admiringly, "I take off my hat to you. You think of *everything!"*

ii

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Sutcliffe at the breakfast table. "Henry!" She had just unfolded her newspaper.

The width of the table was between her and her husband since her weekend guests had not yet put in an appearance for the meal.

Mr. Sutcliffe, who had opened his paper to the financial page, and was absorbed in the unforeseen movements of certain shares, did not reply.

"Henry!"

The clarion call reached him. He raised a startled face.

"What's the matter, Joan?"

"The matter? Another murder! At Meadowbank! At Jennifer's school."

"What? Here, let *me* see!"

Disregarding his wife's remark that it would be in his paper, too, Mr. Sutcliffe leant across the table and snatched the sheet from his wife's grasp.

"Miss Eleanor Vansittart . . . Sports Pavilion . . . same spot where Miss Springer, the games mistress . . . hm . . . hm . . ."

"I can't believe it!" Mrs. Sutcliffe was wailing. "Meadowbank. Such an exclusive school. Royalty there and everything . . ."

Mr. Sutcliffe crumpled up the paper and threw it down on the table.

"Only one thing to be done," he said. "You get over there right away and take Jennifer out of it."

"You mean take her away—altogether?"

"That's what I mean."

"You don't think that would be a little too drastic? After Rosamond being so good about it and managing to get her in?"

"You won't be the only one taking your daughter away! Plenty of vacancies soon at your precious Meadowbank."

"Oh, Henry, do you think so?"

"Yes, I do. Something badly wrong there. Take Jennifer away today."

"Yes—of course—I suppose you're right. What shall we do with her?"

"Send her to a secondary modern somewhere handy. They don't have murders there."

"Oh, Henry, but they *do.* Don't you remember? There was a boy who shot the science master at one. It was in last week's *News of the World."*

"I don't know what England's coming to," said Mr. Sutcliffe.

Disgusted, he threw his napkin on the table and strode from the room.

iii

Adam was alone in the Sports Pavilion . . . His deft fingers were turning over the contents of the lockers. It was unlikely that he would find anything where the police had failed but after all, one could never be sure. As Kelsey had said every department's technique varied a little.

What was there that linked this expensive modern building with sudden and violent death? The idea of a rendezvous was out. No one would choose to keep a rendezvous a second time in the same place where murder had occurred. It came back to it, then, that there was something here that someone was looking for. Hardly a cache of jewels. That seemed ruled out. There could be no secret hiding place, false drawers, spring catches, etc. And the contents of the lockers were pitifully simple. They had their secrets, but they were the secrets of school life. Photographs of pin-up heroes, packets of cigarettes, an occasional unsuitable cheap paperback. Especially he returned to Shaista's locker. It was while bending over that that Miss Vansittart had been killed. What had Miss Vansittart expected to find there? Had she found it? Had her killer taken it from her dead hand and then slipped out of the building in the nick of time to miss being discovered by Miss Chadwick?

In that case it was no good looking. Whatever it was, was gone.

The sound of footsteps outside aroused him from his thoughts. He was on his feet and lighting a cigarette in the middle of the floor when Julia Upjohn appeared in the doorway, hesitating a little.

"Anything you want, miss?" asked Adam.

"I wondered if I could have my tennis racquet."

"Don't see why not," said Adam. "Police constable left me here," he explained mendaciously. "Had to drop back to the station for something. Told me to stop here while he was away."

"To see if he came back, I suppose," said Julia.

"The police constable?"

"No. I mean the murderer. They do, don't they? Come back to the scene of the crime. They have to! It's a compulsion."

"You may be right," said Adam. He looked up at the serried rows of racquets in their presses. "Whereabouts is yours?"

"Under U," said Julia. "Right at the far end. We have our names on them," she explained, pointing out the adhesive tape as he handed the racquet to her.

"Seen some service," said Adam. "But been a good racquet once."

"Can I have Jennifer Sutcliffe's, too?" asked Julia.

"New," said Adam appreciatively, as he handed it to her.

"Brand new," said Julia. "Her aunt sent it to her only the other day."

"Lucky girl."

"She ought to have a good racquet. She's very good at tennis. Her backhand's come on like anything this term." She looked round. "Don't you think he *will* come back?"

Adam was a moment or two getting it.

"Oh. The murderer? No, I don't think it's really likely. Bit risky, wouldn't it be?"

"You don't think murderers feel they *have* to?"

"Not unless they've left something behind."

"You mean a clue? I'd like to find a clue. Have the police found one?"

"They wouldn't tell me."

"No. I suppose they wouldn't . . . Are you interested in crime?"

She looked at him inquiringly. He returned her glance. There was, as yet, nothing of the woman in her. She must be of much the same age as Shaista, but her eyes held nothing but interested inquiry.

"Well—I suppose—up to a point—we all are."

Julia nodded in agreement.

"Yes. I think so, too . . . I can think of all sorts of solutions—but most of them are very farfetched. It's rather fun, though."

"You weren't fond of Miss Vansittart?"

"I never really thought about her. She was all right. A bit like the Bull—Miss Bulstrode—but not really like her. More like an understudy in a theatre. I didn't mean that it was fun she was dead. I'm sorry about that."

She walked out holding the two racquets.

Adam remained looking round the Pavilion.

"What the hell could there ever have been here?" he muttered to himself.

iv

"Good Lord," said Jennifer, allowing Julia's forehand drive to pass her. "There's Mummy."

The two girls turned to stare at the agitated figure of Mrs. Sutcliffe, shepherded by Miss Rich, rapidly arriving and gesticulating as she did so.

"More fuss, I suppose," said Jennifer resignedly. "It's the murder. You *are* lucky, Julia, that your mother's safely on a bus in the Caucasus."

"There's still Aunt Isabel."

"Aunts don't mind in the same way.

"Hullo, Mummy," she added, as Mrs. Sutcliffe arrived.

"You must come and pack your things, Jennifer. I'm taking you back with me."

"Back home?"

"Yes."

"But—you don't mean altogether? Not for good?"

"Yes. I do."

"But you can't—really. My tennis has come on like anything. I've got a very good chance of winning the singles and Julia and I *might* win the doubles, though I don't think it's very likely."

"You're coming home with me today."

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions."

"I suppose it's because of Miss Springer and Miss Vansittart being murdered. But no one's murdered any of the girls. I'm sure they wouldn't want to. And Sports Day is in three weeks' time. I *think* I shall win the long jump and I've a good chance for the hurdling."

"Don't argue with me, Jennifer. You're coming back with me today. Your father insists."

"But, Mummy—"

Arguing persistently Jennifer moved toward the house by her mother's side.

Suddenly she broke away and ran back to the tennis court.

"Goodby, Julia. Mummy seems to have got the wind up thoroughly. Daddy, too, apparently. Sickening, isn't it? Goodby. I'll write to you."

"I'll write to you, too, and tell you all that happens."

"I hope they don't kill Chaddy next. I'd rather it was Mademoiselle Blanche, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. She's the one we could spare best. I say, did you notice how black Miss Rich was looking?"

"She hasn't said a word. She's furious at Mummy coming and taking me away."

"Perhaps she'll stop her. She's very forceful, isn't she? Not like anyone else."

"She reminds me of someone," said Jennifer.

"I don't think she's a bit like anybody. She always seems to be quite different."

"Oh, yes. She is different. I meant in appearance. But the person I knew was quite fat."

"I can't imagine Miss Rich being fat."

"Jennifer . . ." called Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"I do think parents are trying," said Jennifer crossly. "Fuss, fuss, fuss. They never stop. I do think you're lucky to—"

"I know. You said that before. But just at the moment, let me tell you, I wish Mummy were a good deal nearer, and *not* on a bus in Anatolia."

"Jennifer . . ."

"Coming . . ."

Julia walked slowly in the direction of the Sports Pavilion. Her steps grew slower and slower and finally she stopped altogether. She stood, frowning, lost in thought.

The luncheon bell sounded, but she hardly heard it. She stared down at the racquet she was holding, moved a step or two along the path, then wheeled round and marched determinedly toward the house. She went in by the front door, which was not allowed, and thereby avoided meeting any of the other girls. The hall was empty. She ran up the stairs to her small bedroom, looked round her hurriedly, then lifting the mattress on her bed, shoved the racquet flat beneath it. Then, rapidly smoothing her hair, she walked demurely downstairs to the dining room.

CHAPTER XVII

ALADDIN'S CAVE

THE GIRLS WENT up to bed that night more quietly than usual. For one thing their numbers were much depleted. At least thirty of them had gone home. The others reacted according to their several dispositions. Excitement, trepidation, a certain amount of giggling that was purely nervous in origin, and there were some again who were merely quiet and thoughtful.

Julia Upjohn went up quietly among the first wave. She went into her room and closed the door. She stood there listening to the whispers, giggles, footsteps, and goodnights. Then silence closed down—or a near silence. Faint voices echoed in the distance, and footsteps went to and fro to the bathroom.

There was no lock on the door. Julia pulled a chair against it, with the top of the chair wedged under the handle. That would give her warning if anyone should come in. But no one was likely to come in. It was strictly forbidden for the girls to go into each other's rooms, and the only mistress who did so was Miss Johnson, if one of the girls was ill or out of sorts.

Julia went to her bed, lifted up the mattress and groped under it. She brought out the tennis racquet and stood a moment holding it. She had decided to examine it now, and not later. A light in her room showing under the door might attract attention when all lights were supposed to be off. Now was the time when a light was normal for undressing and for reading in bed until half past ten if you wanted to do so.

She stood staring down at the racquet. How could there be anything hidden in a tennis racquet?

"But there must be," said Julia to herself. "There *must.* The burglary at Jennifer's home, the woman who came with that silly story about a new racquet . . ."

"Only Jennifer would have believed that," thought Julia scornfully.

No, it was "new lamps for old" and that meant, like in Aladdin that there was *something* about this particular tennis racquet. Jennifer and Julia had never mentioned to anyone that they had swopped racquets—or at least, she herself never had.

So really then, *this* was the racquet that everyone was looking for in the Sports Pavilion. And it was up to her to find out *why!* She examined it carefully. There was nothing unusual about it to look at. It was a good quality racquet, somewhat the worse for wear, but restrung and eminently usable. Jennifer had complained of the balance.

The only place you could possibly conceal anything in a tennis racquet was in the handle. You could, she supposed, hollow out the handle to make a hiding place. It sounded a little farfetched but it was possible. And if the handle had been tampered with, that probably *would* upset the balance.

There was a round of leather with lettering on it, the lettering almost worn away. That of course was only stuck on. If one removed that? Julia sat down at her dressing table and attacked it with a penknife and presently managed to pull the leather off. Inside was a round of thin wood. It didn't look quite right. There was a join all round it. Julia dug in her penknife. The blade snapped. Nail scissors were more effective. She succeeded at last in prizing it out. A mottled red and blue substance now showed. Julia poked it and enlightenment came to her. *Modeling clay!* But surely handles of tennis racquets didn't normally contain clay? She grasped the nail scissors firmly and began to dig out lumps of clay. The stuff was encasing something. Something that felt like buttons or pebbles.

She attacked the clay vigorously.

Something rolled out on the table—then another something. Presently there was quite a heap.

Julia leaned back and gasped. She stared and stared and stared . . .

Liquid fire, red and green and deep blue and dazzling white . . .

In that moment, Julia grew up. She was no longer a child. She became a woman. A woman looking at jewels . . .

All sorts of fantastic snatches of thought raced through her brain. Aladdin's cave . . . Marguerite and her casket of jewels (they had been taken to Covent Garden to hear Faust last week) . . . fatal stones . . . the Hope diamond . . . romance . . . herself in a black velvet gown with a flashing necklace round her throat . . .

She sat and gloated and dreamed. She held the stones in her fingers and let them fall through in a rivulet of fire, a flashing stream of wonder and delight.

And then, some slight sound perhaps, recalled her to herself.

She sat thinking, trying to use her common sense, deciding what she ought to do. That faint sound had alarmed her. She swept up the stones, took them to the washstand and thrust them into her sponge bag and rammed her sponge and nail brush down on top of them. Then she went back to the tennis racquet, forced the putty back inside it, replaced the wooden top and tried to gum down the leather on top again. It curled upward, but she managed to deal with that by applying adhesive tape the wrong way up in thin strips and then pressing the leather onto it.

It was done. The racquet looked and felt just as before, its weight hardly altered in feel. She looked at it and then cast it down carelessly on a chair.

She looked at her bed, neatly turned down and waiting. But she did not undress. Instead she sat listening. Was that a footstep outside?

Suddenly and unexpectedly she knew fear. Two people had been killed. If anyone knew what she had found, *she* would be killed . . .

There was a fairly heavy oak chest of drawers in the room. She managed to drag it in front of the door, wishing that it was the custom at Meadowbank to have keys in the locks. She went to the window, pulled up the top sash and bolted it. There was no tree growing near the window and no creepers. She doubted if it was possible for anyone to come in that way but she was not going to take any chances.

She looked at her small clock. Half past ten. She drew a deep breath and turned out the light. No one must notice anything unusual. She pulled back the curtain a little from the window. There was a full moon and she could see the door clearly. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed. In her hand she held the stoutest shoe she possessed.

"If anyone tries to come in," Julia said to herself, "I'll rap on the wall here as hard as I can. Mary King is next door and that will wake her up. *And* I'll scream—at the top of my voice. And then, if lots of people come, I'll say I had a nightmare. Anyone might have a nightmare after all the things that have been going on here."

She sat there and time passed. Then she heard it—a soft step along the passage. She heard it stop outside her door. A long pause and then she saw the handle slowly turning.

Should she scream? Not yet.

The door was pushed—just a crack, but the chest of drawers held it. That must have puzzled the person outside.

Another pause, and then there was a knock, a very gentle little knock, on the door.

Julia held her breath. A pause, and then the knock came again—but still soft and muted.

"I'm asleep," said Julia to herself. "I don't hear *anything.*"

Who would come and knock on her door in the middle of the night? If it was someone who had a right to knock, they'd call out, rattle the handle, make a noise. But this person couldn't afford to make a noise . . .

For a long time Julia sat there. The knock was not repeated, the handle stayed immovable. But Julia sat tense and alert.

She sat like that for a long time. She never knew herself how long it was before sleep overcame her. The school bell finally awoke her, lying in a cramped and uncomfortable heap on the edge of her bed.

ii

After breakfast, the girls went upstairs and made their beds, then went down to prayers in the big hall and finally dispersed to various classrooms.

It was during that last exercise, when girls were hurrying in different directions, that Julia went into one classroom, out by a further door, joined a group hurrying round the house, dived behind a rhododendron, made a series of further strategic dives and arrived finally near the wall of the grounds where a lime tree had thick growth almost down to the ground. Julia climbed the tree with ease, she had climbed trees all her life. Completely hidden in the leafy branches, she sat, glancing from time to time at her watch. She was fairly sure she would not be missed for some time. Things were disorganized, two teachers were missing, and more than half the girls had gone home. That meant that all classes would have been reorganized, so nobody would be likely to observe the absence of Julia Upjohn until lunchtime and by then . . .

Julia looked at her watch again, scrambled easily down the tree to the level of the wall, straddled it and dropped neatly on the other side. A hundred yards away was a bus stop where a bus ought to arrive in a few minutes. It duly did so, and Julia hailed and boarded it, having by now abstracted a felt hat from inside her cotton frock and clapped it on her slightly dishevelled hair. She got out at the station and took a train to London.

In her room, propped up on the washstand, she had left a note addressed to Miss Bulstrode.

Dear Miss Bulstrode,

I have not been kidnaped or run away, so don't worry. I will come back as soon as I can.

Yours very sincerely,
Julia Upjohn

iii

At 28 Whitehouse Mansions, Georges, Hercule Poirot's immaculate valet and manservant, opened the door and contemplated with some surprise a schoolgirl with a rather dirty face.

"Can I see M. Hercule Poirot, please?"

Georges took just a shade longer than usual to reply. He found the caller unexpected.

"Mr. Poirot does not see anyone without an appointment," he said.

"I'm afraid I haven't time to wait for that. I really must see him now. It is very urgent. It's about some murders and a robbery and things like that."

"I will ascertain," said Georges, "if Mr. Poirot will see you."

He left her in the hall and withdrew to consult his master.

"A young lady, sir, who wishes to see you urgently."

"I daresay," said Hercule Poirot. "But things do not arrange themselves as easily as that."

"That is what I told her, sir."

"What kind of a young lady?"

"Well, sir, she's more of a little girl."

"A little girl? A young lady? Which do you mean, Georges? They are really not the same."

"I'm afraid you did not quite get my meaning, sir. She is, I should say, a little girl—of school age, that is to say. But though her frock is dirty and indeed torn, she is essentially a young lady."

"A social term. I see."

"And she wishes to see you about some murders and a robbery."

Poirot's eyebrows went up.

"*Some* murders, and a robbery. Original. Show the little girl—the young lady—in."

Julia came into the room with only the slightest trace of diffidence. She spoke politely and quite naturally.

"How do you do, M. Poirot. I am Julia Upjohn. I think you know a great friend of Mummy's. Mrs. Summerhayes. We stayed with her last summer and she talked about you a lot."

"Mrs. Summerhayes . . ." Poirot's mind went back to a village that climbed a hill and to a house on top of that hill. He recalled a charming freckled face, a sofa with broken springs, a large quantity of dogs, and other things both agreeable and disagreeable.

"Maureen Summerhayes," he said. "Ah yes."

"I call her Aunt Maureen, but she isn't really an aunt at all. She told us how wonderful you'd been and saved a man who was in prison for murder, and when I couldn't think of what to do and who to go to, I thought of you."

"I am honoured," said Poirot gravely.

He brought forward a chair for her.

"Now tell me," he said. "Georges, my servant, told me you wanted to consult me about a robbery and some murders—more than one murder, then?"

"Yes," said Julia. "Miss Springer and Miss Vansittart. And of course there's the kidnaping, too—but I don't think that's really my business."

"You bewilder me," said Poirot. "Where have all these exciting happenings taken place?"

"At my school—Meadowbank."

"Meadowbank!" exclaimed Poirot. "Ah." He stretched out his hand to where the newspapers lay neatly folded beside him. He unfolded one and glanced over the front page, nodding his head.

"I begin to comprehend," he said. "Now tell me, Julia, tell me everything from the beginning."

Julia told him. It was quite a long story and a comprehensive one—but she told it clearly—with an occasional break as she went back over something she had forgotten.

She brought her story up to the moment when she had examined the tennis racquet in her bedroom last night.

"You see, I thought it was just like Aladdin—new lamps for old—and there must be something about that tennis racquet."

"And there was?"

"Yes."

Without any false modesty, Julia pulled up her skirt, rolled up her knicker leg nearly to her thigh and exposed what looked like a grey poultice attached by adhesive plaster to the upper part of her leg.

She tore off the strips of plaster, uttering an anguished "Ouch" as she did so, and freed the poultice which Poirot now perceived to be a packet enclosed in a portion of grey plastic sponge bag. Julia unwrapped it and without warning poured a heap of glittering stones on the table.

"Nom d'un nom d'un nom!" ejaculated Poirot in an awe-inspired whisper.

He picked them up, letting them run through his fingers.

"Nom d'un nom d'un nom! But they are *real.* Genuine."

Julia nodded.

"I think they must be. People wouldn't kill other people for them otherwise, would they? But I can understand people killing for *these!*"

And suddenly, as had happened last night, a woman looked out of the child's eyes.

Poirot looked keenly at her and nodded.

"Yes—you understand—you feel the spell. They cannot be to you just pretty coloured playthings—more is the pity."

"They're *jewels!*" said Julia, in tones of ecstasy.

"And you found them, you say, in this tennis racquet?"

Julia finished her recital.

"And you have now told me everything?"

"I think so. I may, perhaps, have exaggerated a little here and there. I do exaggerate sometimes. Now Jennifer, my great friend, she's the other way round. She can make the most exciting things sound dull." She looked again at the shining heap. "M. Poirot, who do they really belong to?"

"It is probably very difficult to say. But they do not belong to either you or to me. We have to decide now what to do next."

Julia looked at him in an expectant fashion.

"You leave yourself in my hands? Good."

Hercule Poirot closed his eyes.

Suddenly he opened them and became brisk.

"It seems that this is an occasion when I cannot, as I prefer, remain in my chair. There must be order and method, but in what you tell me, there is no order and method. That is because we have here many threads. But they all converge and meet at one place, Meadowbank. Different people, with different aims, and representing different interests—all converge at Meadowbank. So, I, too, go to Meadowbank. And as for you—where is your mother?"

"Mummy's gone in a bus to Anatolia."

"Ah, your mother has gone in a bus to Anatolia. *Il ne manquait que ça!* I perceive well that she might be a friend of Mrs. Summerhayes! Tell me, did you enjoy your visit with Mrs. Summerhayes?"

"Oh, yes, it was great fun. She's got some lovely dogs."

"The dogs, yes, I well remember."

"They come in and out through all the windows—like in a pantomime."

"You are so right! And the food? Did you enjoy the food?"

"Well, it was a bit peculiar sometimes," Julia admitted.

"Peculiar, yes, indeed."

"But Aunt Maureen makes smashing omelettes."

"She makes smashing omelettes," Poirot's voice was happy. He sighed.

"Then Hercule Poirot has not lived in vain," he said. "It was *I* who taught your Aunt Maureen to make an omelette." He picked up the telephone receiver.

"We will now reassure your good school mistress as to your safety and announce my arrival with you at Meadowbank."

"She knows I'm all right. I left a note saying I hadn't been kidnaped."

"Nevertheless, she will welcome further reassurance."

In due course he was connected, and was informed that Miss Bulstrode was on the line.

"Ah, Miss Bulstrode? My name is Hercule Poirot. I have with me here your pupil Julia Upjohn. I propose to motor down with her immediately, and for the information of the police officer in charge of the case, a certain packet of some value has been safely deposited in the bank."

He rang off and looked at Julia.

"You would like a syrop?" he suggested.

"Golden syrup?" Julia looked doubtful.

"No, a syrup of fruit juice. Black currant, raspberry, groseille—that is, red currant?"

Julia settled for red currant.

"But the jewels aren't in the bank," she pointed out.

"They will be in a very short time," said Poirot. "But for the benefit of anyone who listens in at Meadowbank, or who overhears, or who is told, it is as well to think they are already there and no longer in your possession. To obtain jewels from a bank requires time and organization. And I should very much dislike anything to happen to you, my child. I will admit that I have formed a high opinion of your courage and your resource."

Julia looked pleased but embarrassed.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONSULTATION

HERCULE POIROT had prepared himself to beat down any insular prejudice that a headmistress might have against aged foreigners with pointed patent leather shoes and large moustaches. But he was agreeably surprised. Miss Bulstrode greeted him with cosmopolitan aplomb. She also, to his gratification, knew all about him.

"It was kind of you, M. Poirot," she said, "to ring up so promptly and allay our anxiety. All the more so because that anxiety had hardly begun. You weren't missed at lunch, Julia, you know," she added, turning to the girl. "So many girls were fetched away this morning, and there were so many gaps at table, that half the school could have been missing, I think, without any apprehension being aroused. These are unusual circumstances," she said, turning back to Poirot. "I assure you we should not be so slack normally. When I received your telephone call," she went on, "I went to Julia's room and found the note she had left."

"I didn't want you to think I'd been kidnaped, Miss Bulstrode," said Julia.

"I appreciate that, but I think, Julia, that you might have told me what you were planning to do."

"I thought I'd better not," said Julia, and added unexpectedly, *"Les oreilles ennemies nous écoute."*

"Mademoiselle Blanche doesn't seem to have done much to improve your accent yet," said Miss Bulstrode, briskly. "But I'm not scolding you, Julia." She looked from Julia to Poirot. "Now, if you please, I want to hear exactly what has happened."

"You permit?" said Hercule Poirot. He stepped across the room, opened the door and looked out. He made an exaggerated gesture of shutting it. He returned beaming.

"We are alone," he said mysteriously. "We can procced."

Miss Bulstrode looked at him, then she looked at the door, then she looked at Poirot again. Her eyebrows rose. He returned her gaze steadily. Very slowly Miss Bulstrode inclined her head. Then, resuming her brisk manner, she said, "Now then, Julia, let's hear all about this."

Julia plunged into her recital. The exchange of tennis racquets, the mysterious woman. And finally her discovery of what the racquet contained. Miss Bulstrode turned to Poirot. He nodded his head gently.

"Mademoiselle Julia has stated everything correctly," he said. "I took charge of what she brought me. It is safely lodged in a bank. I think therefore that you need anticipate no further developments of an unpleasant nature here."

"I see," said Miss Bulstrode. "Yes, I see . . ." She was quiet for a moment or two and then she said, "You think it wise for Julia to remain here? Or would it be better for her to go to her aunt in London?"

"Oh, please," said Julia, "do let me stay here."

"You're happy here then?" said Miss Bulstrode.

"I love it," said Julia. "And besides, there have been such exciting things going on."

"That is *not* a normal feature of Meadowbank," said Miss Bulstrode, drily.

"I think that Julia will be in no danger here now," said Hercule Poirot. He looked again toward the door.

"I think I understand," said Miss Bulstrode.

"But for all that," said Poirot, "there should be discretion. Do you understand discretion, I wonder?" he added, looking at Julia.

"M. Poirot means," said Miss Bulstrode, "that he would like you to hold your tongue about what you found. Not talk about it to the other girls. Can you hold your tongue?"

"Yes," said Julia.

"It is a very good story to tell to your friends," said Poirot. "Of what you found in a tennis racquet in the dead of night. But there are important reasons why it would be advisable that that story should not be told."

"I understand," said Julia.

"Can I trust you, Julia?" said Miss Bulstrode.

"You can trust me," said Julia. "Cross my heart."

Miss Bulstrode smiled. "I hope your mother will be home before long," she said.

"Mummy? Oh, I do hope so."

"I understand from Inspector Kelsey," said Miss Bulstrode, "that every effort is being made to get in touch with her. Unfortunately," she added, "Anatolian buses are liable to unexpected delays and do not always run to schedule."

"I can tell Mummy, can't I?" said Julia.

"Of course. Well, Julia, that's all settled. You'd better run along now."

Julia departed. She closed the door after her. Miss Bulstrode looked very hard at Poirot.

"I have understood you correctly, I think," she said. "Just now, you made a great parade of closing that door. Actually—you deliberately left it slightly open."

Poirot nodded.

"So that what we said could be overheard?"

"Yes—if there was anyone who wanted to overhear. It was a precaution of safety for the child. The news must get round that what she found is safely in a bank, and not in her possession."

Miss Bulstrode looked at him for a moment—then she pursed her lips grimly together.

"There's got to be an end to all this," she said.

ii

"The idea is," said the Chief Constable, "that we try to pool our ideas and information. We are very glad to have you with us, M. Poirot," he added. "Inspector Kelsey remembers you well."

"It's a great many years ago," said Inspector Kelsey. "Chief Inspector Warrender was in charge of the case. I was a fairly raw sergeant knowing my place."

"The gentleman called, for convenience's sake by us, Mr. Adam Goodman, is not known to you, M. Poirot, but I believe you do know his—his—er—chief. Special Branch," he added.

"Colonel Pikeaway?" said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, it is some time since I have seen him. Is he still as sleepy as ever?" he asked Adam.

Adam laughed. "I see you know him all right, M. Poirot. I've never seen him wide awake. When I do, I'll know that for once he isn't paying attention to what goes on."

"You have something there, my friend. It is well observed."

"Now," said the Chief Constable, "let's get down to things. I shan't push myself forward or urge my own opinions. I'm here to listen to what the men who are actually working on the case know and think. There are a great many sides to all this, and one thing perhaps I ought to mention first of all. I'm saying this as a result of representations that have been made to me from—er—various quarters high up." He looked at Poirot. "Let's say," he said, "that a little girl—a schoolgirl—came to you with a pretty tale of something she'd found in the hollowed-out handle of a tennis racquet. Very exciting for her. A collection, shall we say, of coloured stones, paste, good imitation—something of that kind—or even semiprecious stones which often look as attractive as the other kind. Anyway let's say something that a child would be excited to find. She might even have exaggerated ideas of its value. That's quite possible, don't you think?" He looked very hard at Hercule Poirot.

"It seems to me eminently possible," said Hercule Poirot.

"Good," said the Chief Constable. "Since the person who brought these —er—coloured stones into the country did so quite unknowingly and innocently, we don't want any question of illicit smuggling to arise.

"Then there is the question of our foreign policy," he went on. "Things, I am led to understand, are rather—delicate just at present. When it comes to large interests in oil, mineral deposits, all that sort of thing, we have to deal with whatever government's in power. We don't want any awkward questions to arise. You can't keep murder out of the press, and murder hasn't been kept out of the press. But there's been no mention of anything like jewels in connection with it. For the present, at any rate, there needn't be."

"I agree," said Poirot. "One must always consider international complications."

"Exactly," said the Chief Constable. "I think I'm right in saying that the late ruler of Ramat was regarded as a friend of this country, and that the powers that be would like his wishes in respect of any property of his that *might* be in this country to be carried out. What that amounts to, I gather, nobody knows at present. If the new Government of Ramat is claiming certain property which they allege belongs to them, it will be much better if we know nothing about such property being in this country. A plain refusal would be tactless."

"One does not give plain refusals in diplomacy," said Hercule Poirot. "One says instead that such a matter shall receive the utmost attention but that at the moment nothing definite is known about any little—nest egg, say—that the late ruler of Ramat may have possessed. It may still be in Ramat, it may be in the keeping of a faithful friend of the late Prince Ali Yusuf, it may have been taken out of the country by half a dozen people, it may be hidden somewhere in the city of Ramat itself." He shrugged his shoulders. "One simply does not know."

The Chief Constable heaved a sigh. "Thank you," he said. "That's just what I mean." He went on, "M. Poirot, you have friends in very high quarters in this country. They put much trust in you. Unofficially they would like to leave a certain article in your hands if you do not object."

"I do not object," said Poirot. "Let us leave it at that. We have more serious things to consider, have we not?" He looked round at them. "Or perhaps you do not think so? But after all, what is three quarters of a million or some such sum in comparison with human life?"

"You're right, M. Poirot," said the Chief Constable.

"You're right every time," said Inspector Kelsey. "What we want is a murderer. We shall be glad to have your opinion, M. Poirot," he added, "because it's largely a question of guess and guess again and your guess is as good as the next man's and sometimes better. The whole thing's like a snarl of tangled wool."

"That is excellently put," said Poirot, "one has to take up that snarl of wool and pull out the one colour that we seek, the colour of a murderer. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Then tell me, if it is not too tedious for you to indulge in repetition, all that is known so far."

He settled down to listen.

He listened to Inspector Kelsey, and he listened to Adam Goodman. He listened to the brief summing up of the Chief Constable. Then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and slowly nodded his head.

"Two murders," he said, "committed in the same place and roughly under the same conditions. One kidnaping. The kidnaping of a girl who might be the central figure of the plot. Let us ascertain first *why* she was kidnaped."

"I can tell you what she said herself," said Kelsey.

He did so, and Poirot listened.

"It does not make sense," he complained.

"That's what I thought at the time. As a matter of fact I thought she was just making herself important . . ."

"But the fact remains that she *was* kidnaped. Why?"

"There have been ransom demands," said Kelsey slowly, "but . . ." He paused.

"But they have been, you think, phoney? They have been sent merely to bolster up the kidnaping theory?"

"That's right. The appointments made weren't kept."

"Shaista, then, was kidnaped for some other reason. What reason?"

"So that she could be made to tell where the—er—valuables were hidden?" suggested Adam doubtfully.

Poirot shook his head.

"She did not know where they were hidden," he pointed out. "That at least, is clear. No, there must be something . . ."

His voice tailed off. He was silent, frowning, for a moment or two. Then he sat up, and asked a question.

"Her knees," he said. "Did you ever notice her knees?"

Adam stared at him in astonishment.

"No," he said. "Why should I?"

"There are many reasons why a man notices a girl's knees," said Poirot severely. "Unfortunately, you did not."

"Was there something odd about her knees? A scar? Something of that kind? I wouldn't know. They all wear stockings most of the time, and their skirts are just below knee length."

"In the swimming pool, perhaps?" suggested Poirot hopefully.

"Never saw her go in," said Adam. "Too chilly for her, I expect. She was used to a warm climate. What are you getting at? A scar? Something of that kind?"

"No, no, that is not it at all. Ah well, a pity."

He turned to the Chief Constable.

"With your permission, I will communicate with my old friend, the Préfet, at Geneva. I think he may be able to help us."

"About something that happened when she was at school there?"

"It is possible, yes. You do permit? Good. It is just a little idea of mine." He paused and went on: "By the way, there has been nothing in the papers about the kidnaping?"

"The Emir Ibrahim was most insistent."

"But I did notice a little remark in a gossip column. About a certain foreign young lady who had departed from school very suddenly. A budding romance, the columnist suggested. To be nipped in the bud if possible!"

"That was my idea," said Adam. "It seemed a good line to take."

"Admirable. So now we pass from kidnaping to something more serious. Murder. Two murders at Meadowbank."

CHAPTER XIX

CONSULTATION CONTINUED

"TWO MURDERS AT Meadowbank," repeated Poirot thoughtfully.

"We've given you the facts," said Kelsey. "If you've any ideas—?"

"Why the Sports Pavilion?" said Poirot. "That was your question, wasn't it?" he said to Adam. "Well, now we have the answer. Because in the Sports Pavilion there was a tennis racquet containing a fortune in jewels. Someone knew about that racquet. Who was it? It could have been Miss Springer herself. She was, so you all say, rather peculiar about that Sports Pavilion. Disliked people coming there—unauthorized people, that is to say. She seemed to be suspicious of their motives. Particularly was that so in the case of Mademoiselle Blanche."

"Mademoiselle Blanche," said Kelsey thoughtfully.

Hercule Poirot again spoke to Adam.

"You yourself considered Mademoiselle Blanche's manner odd where it concerned the Sports Pavilion?"

"She explained," said Adam. "She explained too much. I should never have questioned her right to be there if she had not taken so much trouble to explain it away."

Poirot nodded.

"Exactly. That certainly gives one to think. But all we *know* is that Miss Springer was killed in the Sports Pavilion at one o'clock in the morning when she had no business to be there."

He turned to Kelsey.

"Where was Miss Springer before she came to Meadowbank?"

"We don't know," said the Inspector. "She left her last place of employment," he mentioned a famous school, "last summer. Where she has been since we do not know." He added drily: "There was no occasion to ask the question until she was dead. She has no near relatives, or, apparently, any close friends."

"She *could* have been in Ramat, then," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"I believe there was a party of school teachers out there at the time of the trouble," said Adam.

"Let us say, then, that she was there, that in some way she learned about the tennis racquet. Let us assume that after waiting a short time to familiarize herself with the routine at Meadowbank she went out one night to the Sports Pavilion. She got hold of the racquet and was about to remove the jewels from their hiding place when—" he paused, "when someone interrupted her. Someone who had been watching her? Following her that evening? Whoever it was had a pistol—and shot her—but had no time to prize out the jewels, or to take the racquet away, because people were approaching the Sports Pavilion who had heard the shot."

He stopped.

"You think that's what happened?" asked the Chief Constable.

"I do not know," said Poirot. "It is one possibility. The other is that that person with the pistol was there *first,* and was surprised by Miss Springer. Someone who Miss Springer was already suspicious of. She was, you have told me, that kind of woman. A noser out of secrets."

"And the other woman?" asked Adam.

Poirot looked at him. Then, slowly, he shifted his gaze to the other two men.

"*You* do not know," he said. "And *I* do not know. It could have been someone from outside . . . ?"

His voice half asked a question.

Kelsey shook his head.

"I think not. We have sifted the neighbourhood very carefully. Especially, of course, in the case of strangers. There was a Madame Kolinsky staying nearby—known to Adam here. But she could not have been concerned in either murder."

"Then it comes back to Meadowbank. And there is only one method to arrive at the truth—elimination."

Kelsey sighed.

"Yes," he said. "That's what it amounts to. For the first murder, it's a fairly open field. Almost anybody could have killed Miss Springer. The exceptions are Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick—and a child who had the earache. But the second murder narrows things down. Miss Rich, Miss Blake and Miss Shapland are out of it. Miss Rich was staying at Alton Grange Hotel, twenty miles away, Miss Blake was at Littleport, Miss Shapland was in London at a night club, Le Nid Sauvage, with Mr. Denis Rathbone."

"And Miss Bulstrode was also away, I understand?"

Adam grinned. The Inspector and the Chief Constable looked shocked.

"Miss Bulstrode," said the Inspector severely, "was staying with the Duchess of Welsham."

"That eliminates Miss Bulstrode then," said Poirot gravely. "And leaves us—what?"

"Two members of the domestic staff who sleep in, Mrs. Gibbons and a girl called Doris Hogg. I can't consider either of them seriously. That leaves Miss Rowan and Mademoiselle Blanche."

"And the pupils, of course."

Kelsey looked startled.

"Surely you don't suspect them?"

"Frankly, no. But one must be exact."

Kelsey paid no attention to exactitude. He plodded on.

"Miss Rowan has been here about a year. She has a good record. We know nothing against her."

"So we come, then, to Mademoiselle Blanche. It is there that the journey ends."

There was a silence.

"There's no evidence," said Kelsey. "Her credentials seem genuine enough."

"They would have to be," said Poirot.

"She snooped," said Adam. "But snooping isn't evidence of murder."

"Wait a minute," said Kelsey, "there was something about a key. In our first interview with her—I'll look it up—something about the key of the Pavilion falling out of the door and she picked it up and forgot to replace it—walked out with it and Springer bawled her out."

"Whoever wanted to go out there at night and look for the racquet would have had to have a key to get in with," said Poirot. "For that, it would have been necessary to take an impression of the key."

"Surely," said Adam, "in that case she would never have mentioned the key incident to you."

"That doesn't follow," said Kelsey. "Springer might have talked about the key incident. If so, she might think it better to mention it in a casual fashion."

"It is a point to be remembered," said Poirot.

"It doesn't take us very far," said Kelsey.

He looked gloomily at Poirot.

"There would seem," said Poirot, "that is, if I have been informed correctly, one possibility. Julia Upjohn's mother, I understand, recognized someone here on the first day of term. Someone whom she was surprised to see. From the context, it would seem likely that that someone was connected with Foreign espionage. If Mrs. Upjohn definitely points out Mademoiselle Blanche as the person she recognized, then I think we could proceed with some assurance."

"Easier said than done," said Kelsey. "We've been trying to get in contact with Mrs. Upjohn, but the whole thing's a headache! When the child said a bus, I thought she meant a proper coach tour, running to schedule, and a party all booked together. But that's not it at all. Seems she's just taking local buses to any place she happens to fancy! She's not done it through Cook's or a recognized travel agency. She's all on her own, wandering about. What can you do with a woman like that? She might be anywhere. There's a lot of Anatolia!"

"It makes it difficult, yes," said Poirot.

"Plenty of nice coach tours," said the Inspector in an injured voice. "All made easy for you—where you stop and what you see, and inclusive fares so that you know exactly where you are."

"But clearly, that kind of travel does not appeal to Mrs. Upjohn."

"And in the meantime, here *we* are," went on Kelsey. "Stuck! That Frenchwoman can walk out any moment she chooses. We've nothing on which we could hold her."

Poirot shook his head.

"She will not do that."

"You can't be sure."

"I am sure. If you have committed murder, you do not want to do anything out of character, that may draw attention to you. Mademoiselle Blanche will remain here quietly until the end of the term."

"I hope you're right."

"I am sure I am right. And remember, the person whom Mrs. Upjohn saw, *does not know that Mrs. Upjohn saw her.* The surprise when it comes will be complete."

Kelsey sighed.

"If that's all we've got to go on . . ."

"There are other things. Conversation, for instance."

"Conversation?"

"It is very valuable, conversation. Sooner or later, if one has something to hide, one says too much."

"Gives oneself away?" The Chief Constable sounded skeptical.

"It is not quite so simple as that. One is guarded about the thing one is trying to hide. But often one says too much about other things. And there are other uses for conversation. There are the innocent people who know things, but are unaware of the importance of what they know. And that reminds me—"

He rose to his feet.

"Excuse me, I pray. I must go and demand of Miss Bulstrode if there is someone here who can draw."

"Draw?"

"Draw."

"Well," said Adam, as Poirot went out. "First girls' knees, and now draughtsmanship! What next, I wonder?"

ii

Miss Bulstrode answered Poirot's question without evincing any surprise.

"Miss Laurie is our visiting drawing mistress," she said briskly. "But she isn't here today. What do you want her to draw for you?" she added in a kindly manner as though to a child.

"Faces," said Poirot.

"Miss Rich is good at sketching people. She's clever at getting a likeness."

"That is exactly what I need."

Miss Bulstrode, he noted with approval, asked him no questions as to his reasons. She merely left the room and returned with Miss Rich.

After introductions, Poirot said: "You can sketch people? Quickly? With a pencil?"

Eileen Rich nodded.

"I often do. For amusement."

"Good. Please, then, sketch for me the late Miss Springer."

"That's difficult. I knew her for such a short time. I'll try."

She screwed up her eyes, then began to draw rapidly.

"Bien," said Poirot, taking it from her. "And now, if you please, Miss Bulstrode, Miss Rowan, Mademoiselle Blanche and—yes—the gardener Adam."

Eileen Rich looked at him doubtfully, then set to work. He looked at the result, and nodded appreciatively.

"You are good—you are very good. So few strokes—and yet the likeness is there. Now I will ask you to do something more difficult. Give, for example, to Miss Bulstrode a different hair arrangement. Change the shape of her eyebrows."

Eileen stared at him as though she thought he was mad.

"No," said Poirot. "I am not mad. I make an experiment, that is all. Please do as I ask."

In a moment or two she said: "Here you are."

"Excellent. Now do the same for Mademoiselle Blanche and Miss Rowan."

When she had finished he lined up the three sketches.

"Now I will show you something," he said. "Miss Bulstrode, in spite of the changes you have made is still unmistakably Miss Bulstrode. But look at the other two. Because their features are negative, and since they have not Miss Bulstrode's personality, they appear almost different people, do they not?"

"I see what you mean," said Eileen Rich.

She looked at him as he carefully folded the sketches away.

"What are you going to do with them?" she asked.

"Use them," said Poirot.

CHAPTER XX

CONVERSATION

"WELL—I DON'T KNOW what to say," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "Really I don't know what to say—"

She looked with definite distaste at Hercule Poirot.

"Henry, of course," she said, "is not at home."

The meaning of this pronouncement was slightly obscure, but Hercule Poirot thought that he knew what was in her mind. Henry, she was feeling, would be able to deal with this sort of thing. Henry had so many international dealings. He was always flying to the Middle East and to Ghana and to South America and to Geneva, and even occasionally, but not so often, to Paris.

"The whole thing," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, "has been *most* distressing. I was so glad to have Jennifer safely at home with me. Though, I must say," she added, with a trace of vexation, "Jennifer has really been most tiresome. After having made a great fuss about going to Meadowbank and being quite sure she wouldn't like it there, and saying it was a snobby kind of school and not the kind she wanted to go to, *now* she sulks all day long because I've taken her away. It's really too bad."

"It is undeniably a very good school," said Hercule Poirot. "Many people say the best school in England."

"It *was,* I daresay," said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"And will be again," said Hercule Poirot.

"You think so?" Mrs. Sutcliffe looked at him doubtfully. His sympathetic manner was gradually piercing her defenses. There is nothing that eases the burden of a mother's life more than to be permitted to unburden herself of the difficulties, rebuffs and frustrations which she has in dealing with her offspring. Loyalty so often compels silent endurance. But to a foreigner like Hercule Poirot Mrs. Sutcliffe felt that this loyalty was not applicable. It was not like talking to the mother of another daughter.

"Meadowbank," said Hercule Poirot, "is just passing through an unfortunate phase."

It was the best thing he could think of to say at the moment. He felt its inadequacy and Mrs. Sutcliffe pounced upon the inadequacy immediately.

"Rather more than unfortunate!" she said. "Two murders! And a girl kidnaped. You can't send your daughter to a school where the mistresses are being murdered all the time."

It seemed a highly reasonable point of view.

"If the murders," said Poirot, "turn out to be the work of one person and that person is apprehended, that makes a difference does it not?"

"Well—I suppose so. Yes," said Mrs. Sutcliffe doubtfully. "I mean—you mean—oh, I see, you mean like Jack the Ripper or that other man—who was it? Something to do with Devonshire. Cream? Neil Cream. Who went about killing an unfortunate type of woman. I suppose this murderer just goes about killing school mistresses! If once you've got him safely in prison, and hanged too, I hope, because you're only allowed one murder, aren't you?—like a dog with a bite—what was I saying? Oh, yes, if he's safely caught, well, then I suppose it *would* be different. Of course there can't be many people like that, can there?"

"One certainly hopes not," said Hercule Poirot.

"But then there's this kidnaping, too," pointed out Mrs. Sutcliffe. "You don't want to send your daughter to a school where she may be kidnaped, either, do you?"

"Assuredly not, madame. I see how clearly you have thought out the whole thing. You are so right in all you say."

Mrs. Sutcliffe looked faintly pleased. Nobody had said anything like that to her for some time. Henry had merely said things like "What did you want to send her to Meadowbank for anyway?" and Jennifer had sulked and refused to answer.

"I *have* thought about it," she said. "A great deal."

"Then I should not let kidnaping worry you, madame. *Entre nous,* if I may speak in confidence, about Princess Shaista. It is not exactly a kidnaping—one suspects a romance."

"You mean the naughty girl just ran away to marry somebody?"

"My lips are sealed," said Hercule Poirot. "You comprehend it is not desired that there should be any scandal. This is in confidence *entre nous.* I know you will say nothing."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Sutcliffe virtuously. She looked down at the letter that Poirot had brought with him from the Chief Constable. "I don't quite understand who you are, M.—er—Poirot. Are you what they call in books—a private eye?"

"I am a consultant," said Hercule Poirot loftily.

This flavour of Harley Street encouraged Mrs. Sutcliffe a great deal.

"What do you want to talk to Jennifer about?" she demanded.

"Just to get her impressions of things," said Poirot. "She is observant—yes?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't say that," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "She's not what I call a noticing kind of child at all. I mean, she is always so matter of fact."

"It is better than making up things that have never happened at all," said Poirot.

"Oh, Jennifer wouldn't do *that* sort of thing," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, with certainty. She got up, went to the window and called "Jennifer."

"I wish," she said, to Poirot, as she came back again, "that you'd try and get it into Jennifer's head that her father and I are only doing our best for her."

Jennifer came into the room with a sulky face and looked with deep suspicion at Hercule Poirot.

"How do you do?" said Poirot. "I am a very old friend of Julia Upjohn. She came to London to find me."

"Julia went to London?" said Jennifer, slightly surprised. "Why?"

"To ask my advice," said Hercule Poirot.

Jennifer looked unbelieving.

"I was able to give it to her," said Poirot. "She is now back at Meadowbank," he added.

"So her Aunt Isabel didn't take *her* away," said Jennifer, shooting an irritated look at her mother.

Poirot looked at Mrs. Sutcliffe and for some reason, perhaps because she had been in the middle of counting the laundry when Poirot arrived and perhaps because of some unexplained compulsion, she got up and left the room.

"It's a bit hard," said Jeniffer, "to be out of all that's going on there. All this fuss! I told Mummy it was silly. After all, none of the *pupils* have been killed."

"Have you any ideas of your own about the murders?" asked Poirot.

Jennifer shook her head. "Someone who's batty?" she offered. She added thoughtfully, "I suppose Miss Bulstrode will have to get some new mistresses now."

"It seems possible, yes," said Poirot. He went on, "I am interested, Mademoiselle Jennifer, in the woman who came and offered you a new racquet for your old one. Do you remember?"

"I should think I do remember," said Jennifer. "I've never found out to this day who really sent it. It wasn't Aunt Gina at all."

"What did this woman look like?" said Poirot.

"The one who brought the racquet?" Jennifer half closed her eyes as though thinking. "Well, I don't know. She had on a sort of fussy dress with a little cape, I think. Blue, and a floppy sort of hat."

"Yes?" said Poirot. "I meant perhaps not so much her clothes as her face."

"A good deal of make-up, I think," said Jennifer vaguely. "A bit too much for the country, I mean, and fair hair. I think she was an American."

"Had you ever seen her before?" asked Poirot.

"Oh, no," said Jennifer. "I don't think she lived down there. She said she'd come down for a luncheon party or a cocktail party or something."

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. He was interested in Jennifer's complete acceptance of everything that was said to her. He said gently:

"But she might not have been speaking the truth?"

"Oh," said Jennifer. "No, I suppose not."

"You're quite sure you hadn't seen her before? She could not have been, for instance, one of the girls dressed up? Or one of the mistresses?"

"Dressed up?" Jennifer looked puzzled.

Poirot laid before her the sketch Eileen Rich had done for him of Mademoiselle Blanche.

"This was not the woman, was it?"

Jennifer looked at it doubtfully.

"It's a little like her—but I don't think it's her."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

There was no sign that Jennifer recognized that this was actually a sketch of Mademoiselle Blanche.

"You see," said Jennifer, "I didn't really look at her much. She was an American and a stranger, and then she told me about the racquet . . ."

After that, it was clear, Jennifer would have had eyes for nothing but her new possession.

"I see," said Poirot. He went on, "Did you ever see at Meadowbank anyone that you'd seen out in Ramat?"

"In Ramat?" Jennifer thought. "Oh, no—at least—I don't think so."

Poirot pounced on the slight expression of doubt. "But you are not *sure,* Mademoiselle Jennifer."

"Well," Jennifer scratched her forehead with a worried expression, "I mean, you're always seeing people who look like somebody else. You can't quite remember who it is they look like. Sometimes you see people that you *have* met but you don't remember who they are. And they say to you, 'You don't remember me,' and then that's awfully awkward because really you don't. I mean, you sort of know their face but you can't remember their names or where you saw them."

"That is very true," said Poirot. "Yes, that is very true. One often has that experience." He paused a moment then he went on, prodding gently, "Princess Shaista, for instance, you probably recognized *her* when you saw her because you must have seen her in Ramat."

"Oh, was she in Ramat?"

"Very likely," said Poirot. "After all she is a relation of the ruling house. You might have seen her there?"

"I don't think I did," said Jennifer frowning. "Anyway, she wouldn't go about with her face showing there, would she? I mean, they all wear veils and things like that. Though they take them off in Paris and Cairo, I believe. And in London, of course," she added.

"Anyway, you had no feeling of having seen anyone at Meadowbank whom you had seen before?"

"No, I'm sure I hadn't. Of course most people do look rather alike and you might have seen them anywhere. It's only when somebody's got an odd sort of face like Miss Rich, that you notice it."

"Did you think you'd seen Miss Rich somewhere before?"

"I hadn't really. It must have been someone like her. But it was someone much fatter than she was."

"Someone much fatter," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"You couldn't imagine Miss Rich being fat," said Jennifer with a giggle. "She's so frightfully thin and nobbly. And anyway Miss Rich couldn't have been in Ramat because she was away ill last term."

"And the other girls," said Poirot, "had you seen any of the girls before?"

"Only the ones I knew already," said Jennifer. "I did know one or two of them. After all, you know, I was only there three weeks and I really don't know half of the people there even by sight. I wouldn't know most of them if I met them tomorrow."

"You should notice things more," said Poirot severely.

"One can't notice everything," protested Jennifer. She went on: "If Meadowbank is carrying on I would like to go back. See if you can do anything with Mummy. Though really," she added, "I think it's Daddy who's the stumbling block. It's awful here in the country. I get no opportunity to improve my tennis."

"I assure you I will do what I can," said Poirot.

CHAPTER XXI

GATHERING THREADS

"I WANT TO TALK to you, Eileen," said Miss Bulstrode.

Eileen Rich followed Miss Bulstrode into the latter's sitting room. Meadowbank was strangely quiet. About twenty-five pupils were still there. Pupils whose parents had found it either difficult or unwelcome to fetch them. The panic-stricken rush had, as Miss Bulstrode had hoped, been checked by her own tactics. There was a general feeling that by next term everything would have been cleared up. It was much wiser of Miss Bulstrode, they felt, to close the school.

None of the staff had left. Miss Johnson fretted with too much time on her hands. A day in which there was too little to do did not in the least suit her. Miss Chadwick, looking old and miserable, wandered round in a kind of coma of misery. She was far harder hit to all appearance than Miss Bulstrode. Miss Bulstrode, indeed, managed apparently without difficulty to be completely herself, unperturbed, and with no sign of strain or of collapse. The two younger mistresses were not averse to the extra leisure. They bathed in the swimming pool, wrote long letters to friends and relations and sent for cruise literature to study and compare. Ann Shapland had a good deal of time on her hands and did not appear to resent the fact. She spent a good deal of that time in the garden and devoted herself to gardening with quite unexpected efficiency. That she preferred to be instructed in the work by Adam rather than by old Briggs was perhaps a not unnatural phenomenon.

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode?" said Eileen Rich.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," said Miss Bulstrode. "Whether this school can continue or not I do not know. What people will feel is always fairly incalculable because they will all feel differently. But the result will be that whoever feels most strongly will end by converting all the rest. So either Meadowbank is finished—"

"No," said Eileen Rich, interrupting, "not finished." She almost stamped her foot and her hair immediately began coming down. "You mustn't let it be stopped," she said. "It would be a sin—a crime."

"You speak very strongly," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I feel strongly. There are so many things that really don't seem worth while a bit, but Meadowbank does seem worth while. It seemed worth while to me the first moment I came here."

"You're a fighter," said Miss Bulstrode. "I like fighters, and I assure you that I don't intend to give in tamely. In a way I'm going to enjoy the fight. You know, when everything's too easy and things go too well one gets—I don't know the exact word I mean—complacent? Bored? A kind of hybrid of the two. But I'm not bored now and I'm not complacent and I'm going to fight with every ounce of strength I've got, and with every penny I've got, too. Now what I want to say to you is this: If Meadowbank continues, will you come in on a partnership basis?"

"Me?" Eileen Rich stared at her. "Me?"

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Bulstrode. "You."

"I couldn't," said Eileen Rich. "I don't know enough. I'm too young. Why, I haven't got the experience, the knowledge that you'd want."

"You must leave it to me to know what I want," said Miss Bulstrode. "Mind you, this isn't, at the present moment of talking, a good offer. You'd probably do better for yourself elsewhere. But I want to tell you this, and you've got to believe me. I had already decided before Miss Vansittart's unfortunate death, that you were the person I wanted to carry on this school."

"You thought so then?" Eileen Rich stared at her. "But I thought—we all thought—that Miss Vansittart . . ."

"There was no arrangement made with Miss Vansittart," said Miss Bulstrode. "I had her in mind, I will confess. I've had her in mind for the last two years. But something's always held me back from saying anything definite to her about it. I daresay everyone assumed that she'd be my successor. She may have thought so herself. I myself thought so until very recently. And then I decided that she was not what I wanted."

"But she was so suitable in every way," said Eileen Rich. "She would have carried out things in exactly your ways, in exactly your ideas."

"Yes," said Miss Bulstrode, "and that's just what would have been wrong. You can't hold on to the past. A certain amount of tradition is good but never too much. A school is for the children of *today.* It's not for the children of fifty years ago or even of thirty years ago. There are some schools in which tradition is more important than others, but Meadowbank is not one of those. It's not a school with a long tradition behind it. It's a creation, if I may say it, of one woman. Myself. I've tried certain ideas and carried them out to the best of my ability, though occasionally I've had to modify them when they haven't produced the results I'd expected. It's not been a conventional school, but it has not prided itself on being an unconventional school either. It's a school that tries to make the best of both worlds—the past and the future, but the real stress is on the present. That's how it's going to go on, how it ought to go on. Run by someone with ideas—ideas of the present day. Keeping what is wise from the past, looking forward toward the future. You're very much the age I was when I started here but you've got what I no longer can have. You'll find it written in the Bible. *Their old men dream dreams and their young men have visions.* We don't need dreams here, we need vision. I believe you to have vision and that's why I decided that you were the person and not Eleanor Vansittart."

"It would have been wonderful," said Eileen Rich. "Wonderful. The thing I should have liked above all."

Miss Bulstrode was faintly surprised by the tense, although she did not show it. Instead she agreed promptly.

"Yes," she said, "it would have been wonderful. But it isn't wonderful now? Well, I suppose I understand that."

"No, no, I don't mean that at all," said Eileen Rich. "Not at all. I—I can't go into details very well, but if you had—if you had asked me, spoken to me like this a week or a fortnight ago I should have said at once that I couldn't, that it would have been quite impossible. The only reason why it—why it might be possible now is because—well, because it *is* a case of fighting—of taking on things. May I—may I think it over, Miss Bulstrode? I don't know what to say now."

"Of course," said Miss Bulstrode. She was still surprised. One never really knew, she thought, about anybody.

ii

"There goes Rich with her hair coming down again," said Ann Shapland as she straightened herself up from a flower bed. "If she can't control it I can't think why she doesn't get it cut off. She's got a good shaped head and she would look better."

"You ought to tell her so," said Adam.

"We're not on those terms," said Ann Shapland. She went on, "D'you think this place will be able to carry on?"

"That's a very doubtful question," said Adam, "and who am I to judge?"

"You could tell as well as another I should think," said Ann Shapland. "It might, you know. The old Bull, as the girls call her, has got what it takes. A hypnotizing effect on parents to begin with. How long is it since the beginning of term—only a month? It seems like a year. I shall be glad when it comes to an end."

"Will you come back if the school goes on?"

"No," said Ann with emphasis, "no indeed. I've had enough of schools to last me for a lifetime. I'm not cut out for being cooped up with a lot of women anyway. And, frankly, I don't like murder. It's the sort of thing that's fun to read about in the paper or to read yourself to sleep with in the way of a nice book. But the real thing isn't so good. I think," added Ann thoughtfully, "that when I leave here at the end of the term I shall marry Denis and settle down."

"Denis?" said Adam. "That's the one you mentioned to me, wasn't it? As far as I remember his work takes him to Burma and Malaya and Singapore and Japan and places like that. It won't be exactly settling down, will it, if you marry him?"

Ann laughed suddenly. "No, no, I suppose it won't. Not in the physical, geographical sense."

"I think you can do better than Denis," said Adam.

"Are you making me an offer?" said Ann.

"Certainly not," said Adam. "You're an ambitious girl, you wouldn't like to marry a humble jobbing gardener."

"I was wondering about marrying into the C.I.D.," said Ann.

"I'm not in the C.I.D.," said Adam.

"No, no, of course not," said Ann. "Let's preserve the niceties of speech. You're not in the C.I.D. Shaista wasn't kidnaped, everything in the garden's lovely. It is rather," she added, looking round. "All the same," she said after a moment or two, "I don't understand in the least about Shaista turning up in Geneva or whatever the story is. How did she get there? All you people must be very slack to allow her to be taken out of this country."

"My lips are sealed," said Adam.

"I don't think you know the first thing about it," said Ann.

"I will admit," said Adam, "that we have to thank Monsieur Hercule Poirot for having had a bright idea."

"What, the funny little man who brought Julia back and came to see Miss Bulstrode?"

"Yes. He calls himself," said Adam, "a consultant detective."

"I think he's pretty much of a has-been," said Ann.

"I don't understand what he's up to at all," said Adam. "He even went to see my mother—or some friend of his did."

"Your mother?" said Ann, "why?"

"I've no idea. He seems to have a kind of morbid interest in mothers. He went to see Jennifer's mother too."

"Did he go and see Miss Rich's mother, and Chaddy's?"

"I gather Miss Rich hasn't got a mother," said Adam. "Otherwise, no doubt, he would have gone to see her."

"Miss Chadwick's got a mother in Cheltenham, she told me," said Ann, "but she's about eighty odd, I believe. Poor Miss Chadwick, she looks about eighty herself. She's coming to talk to us now."

Adam looked up. "Yes," he said, "she's aged a lot in the last week."

"Because she really loves the school," said Ann. "It's her whole life. She can't bear to see it go downhill."

Miss Chadwick indeed looked ten years older than she had done on the day of the opening of term. Her step had lost its brisk efficiency. She no longer trotted about, happy and bustling. She came up to them now, her steps dragging a little.

"Will you please come to Miss Bulstrode," she said to Adam. "She has some instruction about the garden."

"I'll have to clean up a bit first," said Adam. He laid down his tools and moved off in the direction of the potting shed.

Ann and Miss Chadwick walked together toward the house.

"It does seem quiet, doesn't it," said Ann, looking round. "Like an empty house at the theatre," she added thoughtfully, "with people spaced out by the box office as tactfully as possible to make them look like an audience."

"It's dreadful," said Miss Chadwick, "dreadful! Dreadful to think that Meadowbank has come to *this.* I can't get over it. I can't sleep at night. Everything in ruins. All the years of work, of building up something really fine."

"It may get all right again," said Ann cheerfully. "People have got very short memories, you know."

"Not as short as all that," said Miss Chadwick grimly.

Ann did not answer. In her heart she rather agreed with Miss Chadwick.

iii

Mademoiselle Blanche came out of the classroom where she had been teaching French literature.

She glanced at her watch. Yes, there would be plenty of time for what she intended to do. With so few pupils there was always plenty of time these days.

She went upstairs to her room and put on her hat. She was not one of those who went about hatless. She studied her appearance in the mirror with dissatisfaction. Not a personality to be noticed! Well, there could be advantages in that! She smiled to herself. It had made it easy for her to use her sister's testimonials. Even the passport photograph had gone unchallenged. It would have been a thousand pities to waste those excellent credentials when Angele had died. Angele had really enjoyed teaching. For herself, it was unutterable boredom. But the pay was excellent. Far above what she herself had ever been able to earn. And besides, things had turned out unbelievably well. The future was going to be very different. Oh, yes, very different. The drab Mademoiselle Blanche would be transformed. She saw it all in her mind's eye. The Riviera. Herself smartly dressed, suitably made up. All one needed in this world was money. Oh, yes, things were going to be very pleasant indeed. It was worth having come to this detestable English school.

She picked up her handbag, went out of her room and along the corridor. Her eyes dropped to the kneeling woman who was busy there. A new daily help. A police spy, of course. How simple they were—to think that one would not know!

A contemptuous smile on her lips, she went out of the house and down the drive to the front gate. The bus stop was almost opposite. She stood at it, waiting. The bus should be here in a moment or two.

There were very few people about in this quiet country road. A car, with a man bending over the open hood. A bicycle leaning against a hedge. A man also waiting for the bus.

One or other of the three would, no doubt, follow her. It would be skilfully done, not obviously. She was quite alive to the fact, and it did not worry her. Her "shadow" was welcome to see where she went and what she did.

The bus came. She got in. A quarter of an hour later, she got out in the main square of the town. She did not trouble to look behind her. She crossed to where the show windows of a fairly large department store showed their display of new model gowns. Poor stuff, for provincial tastes, she thought, with a curling lip. But she stood looking at them as though much attracted.

Presently she went inside, made one or two trivial purchases, then went up to the first floor and entered the ladies' rest room. There was a writing table there, some easy chairs, and a telephone box. She went into the box, put the necessary coins in, dialled the number she wanted, waiting to hear if the right voice answered.

She nodded in approval, and spoke.

"This is the Maison Blanche. You understand me, the Maison *Blanche?* I have to speak of an account that is owed. You have until tomorrow evening. Tomorrow evening. To pay into the account of the Maison Blanche at the Credit Nationale in London, Ledbury St. branch, the sum that I tell you."

She named the sum.

"If that money is not paid in, then it will be necessary for me to report in the proper quarters what I observed on the night of the 12th. The reference—pay attention—is to Miss Springer. You have a little over twenty-four hours."

She hung up and emerged into the rest room. A woman had just come in from outside. Another customer of the shop, perhaps, or again perhaps not. But if the latter, it was too late for anything to be overheard.

Mademoiselle Blanche freshened herself up in the adjoining cloak room, then she went and tried on a couple of blouses, but did not buy them; she went out into the street again, smiling to herself. She looked into a bookshop, and then caught a bus back to Meadowbank.

She was smiling to herself as she walked up the drive. She had arranged matters very well. The sum she had demanded had not been too large—not impossible to raise at short notice. And it would do very well to go on with. Because, of course, in the future, there would be further demands . . .

Yes, a very pretty little source of income this was going to be. She had no qualms of conscience. She did not consider it in any way her duty to report what she knew and had seen to the police. That Springer had been a detestable woman, rude *mal elevée.* Prying into what was no business of hers. Ah, well, she had got her deserts.

Mademoiselle Blanche stayed for a while by the swimming pool. She watched Eileen Rich diving. Then Ann Shapland, too, climbed up and dived—very well, too. There was laughing, and squeals from the girls.

A bell rang, and Mademoiselle Blanche went in to take her junior class. They were inattentive and tiresome, but Mademoiselle Blanche hardly noticed. She would soon have done with teaching forever.

She went up to her room to tidy herself for supper. Vaguely, without really noticing, she saw that, contrary to her usual practice, she had thrown her garden coat across a chair in the corner instead of hanging it up as usual.

She leaned forward, studying her face in the glass. She applied powder, lipstick.

The movement was so quick that it took her completely by surprise. Noiseless! Professional. The coat on the chair seemed to gather itself together, drop to the ground and in an instant behind Mademoiselle Blanche a hand with a sandbag rose and, as she opened her lips to scream, fell, dully, on the back of her neck.

CHAPTER XXII

INCIDENT IN ANATOLIA

MRS. UPJOHN was sitting by the side of the road overlooking a deep ravine. She was talking partly in French and partly with gestures to a large and solid looking Turkish woman who was telling her with as much detail as possible under these difficulties of communications all about her last miscarriage. Nine children she had had, she explained. Eight of them boys, and five miscarriages. She seemed as pleased at the miscarriages as she did at the births.

"And you?" she poked Mrs. Upjohn amiably in the ribs. *"Combien—garçons—filles—combien?"* She held up her hands ready to indicate on the fingers.

"Une fille," said Mrs. Upjohn.

"Et garçons?"

Seeing that she was about to fall in the Turkish woman's estimation, Mrs. Upjohn in a surge of nationalism proceeded to prejure herself. She held up five fingers of her right hand.

"Cinq," she said.

"Cinq garçons? Tres bien!"

The Turkish woman nodded with approbation and respect. She added that if only her cousin who spoke French really fluently were here they could understand each other a great deal better. She then resumed the story of her last miscarriage.

The other passengers were sprawled about near them, eating odd bits of food from the baskets they carried with them. The bus, looking slightly the worse for wear, was drawn up against an overhanging rock, and the driver and another man were busy inside the hood. Mrs. Upjohn had lost complete count of time. Floods had blocked two of the roads, detours had been necessary and they had once stuck for seven hours until the river they were fording subsided. Ankara lay in the not impossible future and that was all she knew. She listened to her friend's eager and incoherent conversation, trying to gauge when to nod admiringly, when to shake her head in sympathy.

A voice cut into her thoughts, a voice highly incongruous with her present surroundings.

"Mrs. Upjohn, I believe," said the voice.

Mrs. Upjohn looked up. A little way away a car had driven up. The man standing opposite her had undoubtedly alighted from it. His face was unmistakably British, as was his voice. He was impeccably dressed in a grey flannel suit.

"Good heavens," said Mrs. Upjohn. "Dr. Livingstone?"

"It must seem rather like that," said the stranger pleasantly. "My name's Atkinson. I'm from the Consulate in Ankara. We've been trying to get in touch with you for two or three days, but the roads have been cut."

"You wanted to get in touch with me? Why?" Suddenly Mrs. Upjohn rose to her feet. All traces of the gay traveller had disappeared. She was all mother, every inch of her. "Julia?" she said sharply. "Has something happened to Julia?"

"No, no," Mr. Atkinson reassured her. "Julia's quite all right. It's not that at all. There's been a spot of trouble at Meadowbank and we want to get you home there as soon as possible. I'll drive you back to Ankara, and you can get on a plane in about an hour's time."

Mrs. Upjohn opened her mouth and then shut it again. Then she rose and said, "You'll have to get my bag off the top of that bus. It's the dark blue one." She turned, shook hands with her Turkish companion, said: "I'm sorry, I have to go home now," waved to the rest of the busload with the utmost friendliness, called out a Turkish farewell greeting which was part of her small stock of Turkish, and prepared to follow Mr. Atkinson immediately without asking any further questions. It occurred to him as it had occurred to many other people that Mrs. Upjohn was a very sensible woman.

CHAPTER XXIII

SHOWDOWN

In one of the smaller classrooms Miss Bulstrode looked at the assembled people. All the members of her staff were there: Miss Chadwick, Miss Johnson, Miss Rich and the two younger mistresses. Ann Shapland sat with her pad and pencil in case Miss Bulstrode wanted her to take notes. Beside Miss Bulstrode sat Inspector Kelsey and beyond him, Hercule Poirot. Adam Goodman sat in a no man's land of his own halfway between the staff and what he called to himself, the executive body. Miss Bulstrode rose and spoke in her practiced, decisive voice.

"I feel it is due to you all," she said, "as members of my staff, and interested in the fortunes of the school, to know exactly to what point this inquiry has progressed. I have been informed by Inspector Kelsey of several facts. M. Hercule Poirot who has international connections, has obtained valuable assistance from Switzerland and will report himself on that particular matter. We have not yet come to the end of the inquiry, I am sorry to say, but certain minor matters have been cleared up and I thought it would be a relief to you all to know how matters stand at the present moment." Miss Bulstrode looked toward Inspector Kelsey, and he rose.

"Officially," he said, "I am not in a position to disclose all that I know. I can only reassure you to the extent of saying that we are making progress and we are beginning to have a good idea who is responsible for the three crimes that have been committed on the premises. Beyond that I will not go. My friend, M. Hercule Poirot, who is not bound by official secrecy and is at perfect liberty to give you his own ideas, will disclose to you certain information which he himself has been instrumental in procuring. I am sure you are all loyal to Meadowbank and to Miss Bulstrode and will keep to yourselves various matters upon which M. Poirot is going to touch and which are not of any public interest. The less gossip or speculation about them the better, so I will ask you to keep the facts that you will learn here today to yourselves. Is that understood?"

"Of course," said Miss Chadwick, speaking first and with emphasis. "Of course we're all loyal to Meadowbank, I should hope."

"Naturally," said Miss Johnson.

"Oh, yes," said the two younger mistresses.

"I agree," said Eileen Rich.

"Then perhaps, M. Poirot?"

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet, beamed on his audience and carefully twisted his moustaches. The two younger mistresses had a sudden desire to giggle, and looked away from each other pursing their lips together.

"It has been a difficult and anxious time for you all," he said. "I want you to know first that I do appreciate that. It has naturally been worst of all for Miss Bulstrode herself, but you have all suffered. You have suffered first the loss of three of your colleagues, one of whom has been here for a considerable period of time. I refer to Miss Vansittart. Miss Springer and Mademoiselle Blanche were, of course, newcomers but I do not doubt that their deaths were a great shock to you and a distressing happening. You must also have suffered a good deal of apprehension yourselves, for it must have seemed as though there were a kind of vendetta aimed against the mistresses of Meadowbank school. That I can assure you, and Inspector Kelsey will assure you also, is not so. Meadowbank by a fortuitous series of chances became the centre for the attentions of various undesirable interests. There has been, shall we say, a cat among the pigeons. There have been three murders here and also a kidnaping. I will deal first with the kidnaping, for all through this business the difficulty has been to clear out of the way extraneous matters which, though criminal in themselves, obscure the most important thread—the thread of a ruthless and determined killer in your midst."

He took from his pocket a photograph.

"First, I will pass round this photograph."

Kelsey took it, handed it to Miss Bulstrode and she in turn handed it to the staff. It was returned to Poirot. He looked at their faces, which were quite blank.

"I ask you, all of you, do you recognize the girl in that photograph?"

One and all they shook their heads.

"You should do so," said Poirot. "Since that is a photograph obtained by me from Geneva of Princess Shaista."

"But it's not Shaista at all," cried Miss Chadwick.

"Exactly," said Poirot. "The threads of all this business start in Ramat where, as you know, a revolutionary *coup d'état* took place about three months ago. The ruler, Prince Ali Yusuf managed to escape, flown out by his own private pilot. Their plane, however, crashed in the mountain north of Ramat and was not discovered until later in the year. A certain article of great value which was always carried on Prince Ali's person, was missing. It was not found in the wreck and there were rumours that it had been brought to this country. Several groups of people were anxious to get hold of this very valuable article. One of their leads to it was Prince Ali Yusuf's only remaining relation, his first cousin, a girl who was then at a school in Switzerland. It seemed likely that if the precious article had been safely got out of Ramat it would be brought to Princess Shaista or to her relatives and guardians. Certain agents were detailed to keep an eye on her uncle, the Emir Ibrahim, and others to keep an eye on the Princess herself. It was known that she was due to come to this school, Meadowbank, this term. Therefore it would have been only natural that someone should be detailed to obtain employment here and to keep a close watch on anyone who approached the Princess, her letters, and any telephone messages. But an even simpler and more efficacious idea was evolved, that of kidnaping Shaista and sending one of their own number to the school as Princess Shaista herself. This could be done successfully since the Emir Ibrahim was in Egypt and did not propose to visit England until late summer. Miss Bulstrode herself had not seen the girl and all arrangements that she had made concerning her reception had been made with the Embassy in London.

"The plan was simple in the extreme. The real Shaista left Switzerland accompanied by a representative from the Embassy in London. Or so it was supposed. Actually, the Embassy in London was informed that a representative from the Swiss school would accompany the girl to London. The real Shaista was taken to a very pleasant chalet in Switzerland where she has been ever since, and an entirely different girl arrived in London, was met there by a representative of the Embassy and subsequently brought to this school. This substitute, of course, was necessarily much older than the real Shaista. But that would hardly attract attention since Eastern girls noticeably look much more mature than their age. A young French actress who specializes in playing schoolgirl parts was the agent chosen.

"I did ask," said Hercule Poirot, in a thoughtful voice, "as to whether anyone had noticed Shaista's knees. Knees are a very good indication of age. The knees of a woman of twenty-three or twenty-four can never really be mistaken for the knees of a girl of fourteen or fifteen. Nobody, alas, had noticed her knees.

"The plan was hardly as successful as had been hoped. Nobody attempted to get in touch with Shaista, no letters or telephone calls of significance arrived for her and as time went on an added anxiety arose. The Emir Ibrahim might arrive in England ahead of schedule. He was not a man who announced his plans ahead. He was in the habit, I understand, of saying one evening 'Tomorrow I go to London' and thereupon to go.

"The false Shaista, then, was aware that at any moment someone who knew the real Shaista might arrive. Especially was this so after the murder and therefore she began to prepare the way for a kidnaping by talking about it to Inspector Kelsey. Of course, the actual kidnaping was nothing of the kind. As soon as she learned that her uncle was coming to take her out the following morning, she sent a brief message by telephone, and half an hour earlier than the genuine car, a showy car with false *Corps Diplomatique* plates on it arrived and Shaista was officially 'kidnaped.' Actually, of course, she was set down by the car in the first large town where she at once resumed her own personality. An amateurish ransom note was sent just to keep up the fiction."

Hercule Poirot paused, then said, "It was, as you can see, merely the trick of the conjuror. Misdirection. You focus the eyes on the kidnaping *here* and it does not occur to anyone that the kidnaping *really* occurred three weeks earlier in Switzerland."

What Poirot really meant, but was too polite to say, was that it had not occurred to anyone but himself!

"We pass now," he said, "to something far more serious than kidnaping —murder.

"The false Shaista could, of course, have killed Miss Springer but she could not have killed Miss Vansittart or Mademoiselle Blanche, and would have had no motive to kill anybody, nor was such a thing required of her. Her role was simply to receive a valuable packet if, as seemed likely, it should be brought to her; or, alternatively, to receive news of it.

"Let us go back now to Ramat where all this started. It was widely rumoured in Ramat that Prince Ali Yusuf had given this valuable packet to Bob Rawlinson, his private pilot, and that Bob Rawlinson had arranged for its dispatch to England. On the day in question Rawlinson went to Ramat's principal hotel where his sister Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter Jennifer were staying. Mrs. Sutcliffe and Jennifer were out, but Bob Rawlinson went up to their room where he remained for at least twenty minutes. That is rather a long time under the circumstances. He might of course have been writing a long letter to his sister. But that was not so. He merely left a short note which he could have scribbled in a couple of minutes.

"It was a very fair inference then, inferred by several separate parties, that during his time in her room he had placed this object among his sister's effects and that she had brought it back to England. Now we come to what I may call the dividing of two separate threads. One set of interests, or possibly more than one set, assumed that Mrs. Sutcliffe had brought this article back to England and in consequence her house in the country was ransacked and a thorough search made. This showed that whoever was searching *did not know where exactly the article was hidden.* Only that it was probably *somewhere* in Mrs. Sutcliffe's possession.

"But somebody else knew very definitely exactly where that article was, and I think that by now it will do no harm for me to tell you where, in fact, Bob Rawlinson did conceal it. He concealed it in the handle of a tennis racquet, hollowing the handle out and afterward piecing it together again so skilfully that it was difficult to see what had been done.

"The tennis racquet belonged, not to his sister, but to her daughter Jennifer. Someone who knew exactly where the cache was, went out to the Sports Pavilion one night, having previously taken an impression of the key and got a key cut. At that time of night everyone should have been in bed and asleep. But that was not so. Miss Springer saw the light of a flashlight in the Sports Pavilion from the house, and went out to investigate. She was a tough hefty young woman and had no doubts of her own ability to cope with anything she might find. The person in question was probably sorting through the tennis racquets to find the right one. Discovered and recognized by Miss Springer, there was no hesitation. The searcher was a killer, and shot Miss Springer dead. Afterward, however, the killer had to act fast. The shot had been heard, people were approaching. At all costs the killer must get out of the Sports Pavilion unseen. The racquet must be left where it was for the moment.

"Within a few days another method was tried. A strange woman with a faked American accent waylaid Jennifer Sutcliffe as she was coming from the tennis courts, and told her a plausible story about a relative of hers having sent her down a new tennis racquet. Jennifer unsuspiciously accepted this story and gladly exchanged the racquet she was carrying for the new expensive one the stranger had brought. But a circumstance had arisen which the woman with the American accent knew nothing about. That was that a few days previously Jennifer Sutcliffe and Julia Upjohn had exchanged racquets so that what the strange woman took away with her was in actual fact Julia Upjohn's old racquet, though the identifying tape on it bore Jennifer's name.

"We come now to the second tragedy. Miss Vansittart for some unknown reason, but possibly connected with the kidnaping of Shaista which had taken place that afternoon, took a flashlight and went out to the Sports Pavilion after everybody had gone to bed. Somebody who had followed her there, struck her down with a cosh or a sandbag, as she was stooping down by Shaista's locker. Again the crime was discovered almost immediately. Miss Chadwick saw a light in the Sports Pavilion and hurried out there.

"The police once more took charge at the Sports Pavilion, and again the killer was debarred from searching and examining the tennis racquets there. But by now, Julia Upjohn, an intelligent child, had thought things over and had come to the logical conclusion that the racquet she possessed and which had originally belonged to Jennifer, was in some way important. She investigated on her own behalf, found that she was correct in her surmise, and brought the contents of the racquet to me.

"These are now," said Hercule Poirot, "in safe custody and need concern us here no longer." He paused and then went on, "It remains to consider the third tragedy.

"What Mademoiselle Blanche knew or suspected we shall never know. She may have seen someone leaving the house on the night of Miss Springer's murder. Whatever it was that she knew or suspected, she knew the identity of the murderer. And she kept that knowledge to herself. She planned to obtain money in return for her silence.

"There is nothing," said Hercule Poirot, with feeling, "more dangerous than levying blackmail on a person who has killed perhaps twice already. Mademoiselle Blanche may have taken her own precautions but whatever they were, they were inadequate. She made an appointment with the murderer and she was killed."

He paused again.

"So there," he said, looking round at them, "you have the account of this whole affair."

They were all staring at him. Their faces which at first had reflected interest, surprise, excitement, seemed now frozen into a uniform calm. It was as though they were terrified to display any emotion. Hercule Poirot nodded at them.

"Yes," he said, "I know how you feel. It has come, has it not, very near home? That is why, you see, I and Inspector Kelsey and Mr. Adam Goodman have been making the inquiries. We have to know, you see, if there is still a cat among the pigeons! You understand what I mean? Is there still someone here who is masquerading under false colours?"

There was a slight ripple passing through those who listened to him, a brief almost furtive sidelong glance as though they wished to look at each other, but did not dare do so.

"I am happy to reassure you," said Poirot. "All of you here at this moment *are exactly who you say you are.* Miss Chadwick, for instance, is Miss Chadwick—that is certainly not open to doubt, she has been here as long as Meadowbank itself! Miss Johnson, too, is unmistakably Miss Johnson. Miss Rich is Miss Rich. Miss Shapland is Miss Shapland. Miss Rowan and Miss Blake are Miss Rowan and Miss Blake. To go further," said Poirot, turning his head. "Adam Goodman who works here in the garden, is, if not precisely Adam Goodman, at any rate the person whose name is on his credentials. So then, where are we? We must seek not for someone masquerading as someone else, but for someone who is, in his or her proper identity, a murderer."

The room was very still now. There was menace in the air.

Poirot went on.

"We want, primarily, *someone who was in Ramat three months ago.* Knowledge that the prize was concealed in the tennis racquet could only have been acquired in one way. Someone must have *seen* it put there by Bob Rawlinson. It is as simple as that. Who, then, of all of you present here, was in Ramat three months ago? Miss Chadwick was here, Miss Johnson was here." His eyes went on to the two junior mistresses. "Miss Rowan and Miss Blake were here."

His finger went out pointing.

"But Miss Rich—Miss Rich was not here last term, was she?"

"I—no. I was ill." She spoke hurriedly. "I was away for a term."

"That is the thing that we did not know," said Hercule Poirot, "until a few days ago somebody mentioned it casually. When questioned by the police originally, you merely said that you had been at Meadowbank for a year and a half. That in itself is true enough. But you were absent last term. You could have been in Ramat—I think you were in Ramat. Be careful. It can be verified, you know, from you passport"

There was a moment's silence, then Eileen Rich looked up.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I was in Ramat. Why not?"

"Why did you go to Ramat, Miss Rich?"

"You already know. I had been ill. I was advised to take a rest—to go abroad. I wrote to Miss Bulstrode and explained that I must take a term off. She quite understood."

"That is so," said Miss Bulstrode. "A doctor's certificate was enclosed which said that it would be unwise for Miss Rich to resume her duties until the following term."

"So—you went to Ramat?" said Hercule Poirot.

"Why shouldn't I go to Ramat?" said Eileen Rich. Her voice trembled slightly. "There are cheap fares offered to school teachers. I wanted a rest. I wanted sunshine. I went out to Ramat. I spent two months there. *Why not? Why not, I say?"*

"You have never mentioned that you were in Ramat at the time of the revolution."

"Why should I? What has it got to do with anyone here? I haven't killed anyone, I tell you. I haven't killed anyone."

"You were recognized, you know," said Hercule Poirot. "Not recognized definitely, but indefinitely. The child Jennifer was very vague. She said she thought she'd seen you in Ramat but concluded it couldn't be you because, she said, the person she had seen was *fat,* not thin." He leaned forward, his eyes boring into Eileen Rich's face.

"What have you to say, Miss Rich?"

She wheeled round. "I know what you're trying to make out!" she cried. "You're trying to make out that it wasn't a secret agent or anything of that kind who did these murders. That it was someone who just *happened* to be there, someone who *happened* to see this treasure hidden in a tennis racquet. Someone who realized that the child was coming to Meadowbank and that she'd have an opportunity to take for herself this hidden thing. But I tell you it isn't *true!"*

"I think that is what happened. Yes," said Poirot. "Someone saw the jewels being hidden and forgot all other duties or interests in the determination to possess them!"

"It isn't true, I tell you. I saw nothing—"

"Inspector Kelsey," Poirot turned his head.

Inspector Kelsey nodded—went to the door, opened it, and Mrs. Upjohn walked into the room.

ii

"How do you do, Miss Bulstrode," said Mrs. Upjohn, looking rather embarrassed. "I'm sorry I'm looking rather untidy, but I was somewhere near Ankara yesterday and I've just flown home. I'm in a terrible mess and I really haven't had time to clean myself up or do *anything."*

"That does not matter," said Hercule Poirot. "We want to ask you something."

"Mrs. Upjohn," said Kelsey, "when you came here to bring your daughter to the school and you were in Miss Bulstrode's sitting room, you looked out of the window—the window which gives on the front drive—and you uttered an exclamation as though you recognized someone you saw there. That is so, is it not?"

Mrs. Upjohn stared at him. "When I was in Miss Bulstrode's sitting room? I looked—oh, yes, of *course!* Yes, I did see someone."

"Someone you were surprised to see?"

"Well, I was rather . . . You, see, it had all been such years ago."

"You mean the days when you were working in Intelligence toward the end of the war?"

"Yes. It was about fifteen years ago. Of course, she looked much older, but I recognized her at once. And I wondered what on earth she could be doing *here.*"

"Mrs. Upjohn, will you look round this room and tell me if you see that person here now?"

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Upjohn. "I saw her as soon as I came in. That's her."

She stretched out a pointing finger. Inspector Kelsey was quick and so was Adam, but they were not quick enough. Ann Shapland had sprung to her feet. In her hand was a small wicked-looking automatic and it pointed straight at Mrs. Upjohn. Miss Bulstrode, quicker than the two men, moved sharply forward, but swifter still was Miss Chadwick. It was not Mrs. Upjohn that she was trying to shield—it was the woman who was standing between Ann Shapland and Mrs. Upjohn.

"No, you shan't," cried Chaddy, and flung herself on Miss Bulstrode just as the small automatic went off.

Miss Chadwick staggered, then slowly crumpled down. Miss Johnson ran to her. Adam and Kelsey had got hold of Ann Shapland now. She was struggling like a wild cat, but they wrested the small automatic from her.

Mrs. Upjohn said breathlessly:

"They said then that she was a killer. Although she was so young. One of the most dangerous agents they had. Angelica was her code name."

"You lying bitch!" Ann Shapland fairly spat out the words.

Hercule Poirot said:

"She does not lie. You are dangerous. You have always led a dangerous life. Up to now, you have never been suspected in your own identity. All the jobs you have taken in your own name have been perfectly genuine jobs, efficiently performed—but they have all been jobs with a purpose, and that purpose has been the gaining of information. You have worked with an oil company, with an archaeologist whose work took him to a certain part of the globe, with an actress whose protector was an eminent politician. Ever since you were seventeen you have worked as an agent—though for many different masters. Your services have been for hire and have been highly paid. You have played a dual role. Most of your assignments have been carried out in your own name, but there were certain jobs for which you assumed different identities. Those were the times when ostensibly you had to go home and be with your mother.

"But I strongly suspect, Miss Shapland, that the elderly woman I visited who lives in a small village with a nurse-companion to look after her, an elderly woman who is genuinely a mental patient with a confused mind, is not your mother at all. She has been your excuse for retiring from employment and from the circle of your friends. The three months this winter that you spent with your 'mother' who had one of her 'bad turns,' covers the time when you went out to Ramat. Not as Ann Shapland but as Angelica da Toredo, a Spanish, or near-Spanish cabaret dancer. You occupied the room in the hotel next to that of Mrs. Sutcliffe and somehow you managed to see Bob Rawlinson conceal the jewels in the racquet. You had no opportunity of taking the racquet then for there was the sudden evacuation of all British people, but you had read the labels on their luggage and it was easy to find out something about them. To obtain a secretarial post here was not difficult. I have made some inquiries. You paid a substantial sum to Miss Bulstrode's former secretary to vacate her post on the plea of a 'breakdown.' And you had quite a plausible story. You had been commissioned to write a series of articles on a famous girls' school 'from within.'

"It all seemed quite easy, did it not? If a child's racquet was missing, what of it? Simpler still, you would go out at night to the Sports Pavilion, and abstract the jewels. But you had not reckoned with Miss Springer. Perhaps she had already seen you examining the racquets. Perhaps she just happened to wake that night. She followed you out there and you shot her. Later, Mademoiselle Blanche tried to blackmail you, and you killed her. It comes natural to you, does it not, to kill?"

He stopped. In a monotonous official voice, Inspector Kelsey cautioned his prisoner.

She did not listen. Turning toward Hercule Poirot, she burst out in a low-pitched flood of invective that startled everyone in the room.

"Whew!" said Adam, as Kelsey took her away. "And I thought she was a nice girl!"

Miss Johnson had been kneeling by Miss Chadwick.

"I'm afraid she's badly hurt," she said. "She'd better not be moved until the doctor comes."

CHAPTER XXIV

POIROT EXPLAINS

MRS. UPJOHN, wandering through the corridors of Meadowbank school, forgot the exciting scene she had just been through. She was for the moment merely a mother seeking her young. She found her in a deserted classroom. Julia was bending over a desk, her tongue protruding slightly, absorbed in the agonies of composition.

She looked up and stared. Then flung herself across the room and hugged her mother.

"Mummy!"

Then, with the self-consciousness of her age, ashamed of her unrestrained emotion, she detached herself and spoke in a carefully casual tone—indeed almost accusingly.

"Aren't you back rather *soon,* Mummy?"

"I flew back," said Mrs. Upjohn, almost apologetically, "from Ankara."

"Oh," said Julia. "Well—I'm glad you're back."

"Yes," said Mrs. Upjohn, "I am very glad too."

They looked at each other, embarrassed. "What are you doing?" said Mrs. Upjohn, advancing a little closer.

"I'm writing a composition for Miss Rich," said Julia. "She really does set the most exciting subjects."

"What's this one?" said Mrs. Upjohn. She bent over.

The subject was written at the top of the page. Some nine or ten lines of writing in Julia's uneven and sprawling handwriting came below. "Contrast the Attitudes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to Murder," read Mrs. Upjohn.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "you can't say that the subject isn't topical!"

She read the start of her daughter's essay. "Macbeth," Julia had written, "liked the idea of murder and had been thinking of it a lot, but he needed a push to get him started. Once he'd got started he enjoyed murdering people and had no more qualms or fears. Lady Macbeth was just greedy and ambitious. She thought she didn't mind what she did to get what she wanted. But once she'd done it she found she didn't like it after all."

"Your language isn't very elegant," said Mrs. Upjohn. "I think you'll have to polish it up a bit, but you've certainly got something there."

ii

Inspector Kelsey was speaking in a slightly complaining tone.

"It's all very well for you, Poirot," he said. "You can say and do a lot of things we can't; and I'll admit the whole thing was well stage-managed. Got her off her guard, made her think we were after Rich, and then Mrs. Upjohn's sudden appearance made her lose her head. Thank the Lord she kept that automatic after shooting Springer. If the bullet corresponds—"

"It will, *mon ami,* it will," said Poirot.

"Then we've got her cold for the murder of Springer. And I gather Miss Chadwick's in a bad way. But look here, Poirot, I still can't see how she can possibly have killed Miss Vansittart. It's physically impossible. She's got a cast-iron alibi—unless young Rathbone and the whole staff of Le Nid Sauvage are in it with her."

Poirot shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "Her alibi is perfectly good. She killed Miss Springer and Mademoiselle Blanche. But Miss Vansittart—" He hesitated for a moment, his eyes going to where Miss Bulstrode sat listening to them. "Miss Vansittart was killed by Miss Chadwick."

"Miss Chadwick?" exclaimed Miss Bulstrode and Kelsey together.

Poirot nodded. "I am sure of it."

"But—why?"

"I think," said Poirot, "Miss Chadwick loved Meadowbank too much . . ." His eyes went across to Miss Bulstrode.

"I see . . ." said Miss Bulstrode. "Yes, yes, I see . . . I ought to have known." She paused. "You mean that she—"

"I mean," said Poirot, "that she started here with you, that all along she has regarded Meadowbank as a joint venture between you both."

"Which in one sense it was," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Quite so," said Poirot. "But that was merely the financial aspect. When you began to talk of retiring she regarded herself as the person who would take over."

"But she's far too old," objected Miss Bulstrode.

"Yes," said Poirot, "she is too old and she is not suited to be a headmistress. But she herself did not think so. She thought that when you went she would be headmistress of Meadowbank as a matter of course. And then she found that that was not so. That you were considering someone else, that you had fastened upon Eleanor Vansittart. And she loved Meadowbank. She loved the school and she did not like Eleanor Vansittart. I think in the end she hated her."

"She might have done," said Miss Bulstrode. "Yes, Eleanor Vansittart was—how shall I put it—she was always very complacent, very superior about everything. That would be hard to bear if you were jealous. That's what you mean, isn't it? Chaddy was jealous."

"Yes," said Poirot. "She was jealous of Meadowbank and jealous of Eleanor Vansittart. She couldn't bear the thought of the school and Miss Vansittart together. And then perhaps something in your manner led her to think that you were weakening."

"I did weaken," said Miss Bulstrode. "But I didn't weaken in the way that perhaps Chaddy thought I would weaken. Actually I thought of someone younger still than Miss Vansittart. I thought it over and then I said Not enough experience. Chaddy was with me then, I remember."

"And she thought," said Poirot, "that you were referring to Miss Vansittart. That you were saying Miss Vansittart was too young. She thoroughly agreed. She thought that experience and wisdom such as she had got were far more important things. But then, after all, you returned to your original decision. You chose Eleanor Vansittart as the right person and left her in charge of the school that week end. This is what I think happened. On that Sunday night Miss Chadwick was restless; she got up and she saw the light in the squash court. She went out there exactly as she says she went. There is only one thing different in her story from what she said. It wasn't a golf club she took with her. She went out there all ready to deal with a burglar, with someone who for a second time had broken into the Sports Pavilion. She had the sandbag ready in her hand to defend herself if attacked. And what did she find? She found Eleanor Vansittart kneeling down looking in a locker, and she thought, it may be—for I am good," said Hercule Poirot in a parenthesis, "at putting myself into other people's minds—she thought '*if* I were a marauder, a burglar, I would come up behind her and strike her down.' And as the thought came into her mind, only half conscious of what she was doing, she raised the sandbag and struck. And there was Eleanor Vansittart dead, out of her way. She was appalled then, I think, at what she had done. It has preyed on her ever since—for she is not a natural killer, Miss Chadwick. She was driven, as some are driven, by jealousy and by obsession. The obsession of love for Meadowbank. Now that Eleanor Vansittart was dead she was quite sure that she would succeed you at Meadowbank. So she didn't confess. She told her story to the police exactly as it had occurred but for the one vital fact, that it was *she* who had struck the blow. But when she was asked about the golf club which presumably Miss Vansittart took with her, being nervous after all that had occurred, Miss Chadwick said quickly that she had taken it out there. She didn't want you to think even for a moment that she had handled the sandbag."

"Why did Ann Shapland also choose a sandbag to kill Mademoiselle Blanche?" asked Miss Bulstrode.

"For one thing, she could not risk a pistol shot in the school building, and for another she is a very clever young woman. She wanted to tie up this third murder with the second one, for which she had an alibi."

"I don't really understand what Eleanor Vansittart was doing herself in the Sports Pavilion," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I think one could make a guess. She was probably far more concerned over the disappearance of Shaista than she allowed to appear on the surface. She was as upset as Miss Chadwick was. In a way it was worse for her, because she had been left by you in charge—and the kidnaping had happened while she was responsible. Moreover she had pooh-poohed it as long as possible through an unwillingness to face unpleasant facts squarely."

"So there was weakness behind the façade," mused Miss Bulstrode. "I sometimes suspected it."

"She, too, I think, was unable to sleep. And I think she went out quietly to the Sports Pavilion to make an examination of Shaista's locker in case there might be some clue there to the girl's disappearance."

"You seem to have explanations for everything, M. Poirot."

"That's his specialty," said Inspector Kelsey with slight malice.

"And what was the point of getting Eileen Rich to sketch various members of my staff?"

"I wanted to test the child Jennifer's ability to recognize a face. I soon satisfied myself that Jennifer was so entirely preoccupied by her own affairs, that she gave outsiders at most a cursory glance, taking in only the external details of their appearance. She did not recognize a sketch of Mademoiselle Blanche with a different hairdo. Still less, then, would she have recognized Ann Shapland who, as your secretary, she seldom saw at close quarters."

"You think that the woman with the racquet was Ann Shapland herself."

"Yes. It has been a one-woman job all through. You remember that day you rang for her to take a message to Julia but in the end, as the buzzer went unanswered, sent a girl to find Julia? Ann was accustomed to quick disguise. A fair wig, differently pencilled eyebrows, a 'fussy' dress and hat. She need only be absent from her typewriter for about twenty minutes. I saw from Miss Rich's clever sketches how easy it is for a woman to alter her appearance by purely external matters."

"Miss Rich—I wonder . . ." Miss Bulstrode looked thoughtful.

Poirot gave Inspector Kelsey a look and the Inspector said he must be getting along.

"Miss Rich?" said Miss Bulstrode again.

"Send for her," said Poirot. "It is the best way."

Eileen Rich appeared. She was white-faced and slightly defiant.

"You want to know," she said to Miss Bulstrode, "what I was doing in Ramat?"

"I think I have an idea," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Just so," said Poirot. "Children nowadays know all the facts of life—but their eyes often retain innocence."

He added that he, too, must be getting along, and slipped out.

"That was it, wasn't it?" said Miss Bulstrode. Her voice was brisk and businesslike. "Jennifer merely described it as fat. She didn't realize it was a pregnant woman she had seen."

"Yes," said Eileen Rich. "That was it. I was going to have a child. I didn't want to give up my job here. I carried on all right through the autumn, but after that, it was beginning to show. I got a doctor's certificate that I wasn't fit to carry on, and I pleaded illness. I went abroad to a remote spot where I thought I wasn't likely to meet anyone who knew me. I came back to this country and the child was born—dead. I came back this term and I hoped that no one would ever know. But you understand now, don't you, why I said I should have had to refuse your offer of a partnership if you'd made it? Only now, with the school in such a disaster, I thought that, after all, I might be able to accept."

She paused and said in a matter-of-fact voice,

"Would you like me to leave now? Or wait until the end of term?"

"You'll stay till the end of the term," said Miss Bulstrode, "and if there is a new term here, which I still hope, you'll come back."

"Come back?" said Eileen Rich. "Do you mean you still want me?"

"Of course I want you," said Miss Bulstrode. "You haven't murdered anyone, have you? Not gone mad over jewels and planned to kill to get them? I'll tell you what you've done. You've probably denied your instincts too long. There was a man, you fell in love with him, you had a child. I suppose you couldn't marry."

"There was never any question of marriage," said Eileen Rich. "I knew that. He isn't to blame."

"Very well, then," said Miss Bulstrode. "You had a love affair and a child. You wanted to have that child?"

"Yes," said Eileen Rich. "Yes, I wanted to have it."

"So that's that," said Miss Bulstrode. "Now I'm going to tell you something. I believe that in spite of this love affair, your real vocation in life is teaching. I think your profession means more to you than any normal woman's life with a husband and children would mean."

"Oh, yes," said Eileen Rich. "I'm sure of that. I've known that all along. That's what I really want to do—that's the real passion of my life."

"Then don't be a fool," said Miss Bulstrode. "I'm making you a very good offer. If, that is, things come right. We'll spend two or three years together putting Meadowbank back on the map. You'll have different ideas as to how that should be done from the ideas that I have. I'll listen to your ideas. Maybe I'll even give in to some of them. You want things to be different, I suppose, at Meadowbank?"

"I do in some ways, yes," said Eileen Rich. "I won't pretend. I want more emphasis on getting girls that really matter."

"Ah," said Miss Bulstrode, "I see. It's the snob element that you don't like, is that it?"

"Yes," said Eileen, "it seems to me to spoil things."

"What you don't realize," said Miss Bulstrode, "is that to get the kind of girl you want you've *got* to have that snob element. It's quite a small element really, you know. A few foreign royalties, a few great names and everybody, all the silly parents all over this country and other countries want their girls to come to Meadowbank. Fall over themselves to get their girls admitted to Meadowbank. What's the result? An enormous waiting list, and I look at the girls and I see the girls and I choose! You get your pick, do you see? I choose my girls. I choose them very carefully, some for character, some for brains, some for pure academic intellect. Some because I think they haven't had a chance but are capable of being made something of that's worth while. You're young, Eileen. You're full of ideals—it's the teaching that matters to you and the ethical side of it. Your vision's quite right. It's the girls that matter, but if you want to make a success of anything, you know, you've got to be a good tradesman as well. Ideas are like everything else. They've got to be marketed. We'll have to do some pretty slick work in future to get Meadowbank going again. I'll have to get my hooks into a few people, former pupils, bully them, plead with them, get them to send their daughters here. And then the others will come. You let me be up to my tricks, and then you shall have your way. Meadowbank will go on and it'll be a fine school."

"It'll be the finest school in England," said Eileen Rich enthusiastically.

"Good," said Miss Bulstrode, "and, Eileen, I should go and get your hair properly cut and shaped. You don't seem able to manage that bun. And now," she said, her voice changing, "I must go to Chaddy."

She went in and came up to the bed. Miss Chadwick was lying very still and white. The blood had all gone from her face and she looked drained of life. A policeman with a notebook sat nearby and Miss Johnson sat on the other side of the bed. She looked at Miss Bulstrode and shook her head gently.

"Hallo, Chaddy," said Miss Bulstrode. She took up the limp hand in hers. Miss Chadwick's eyes opened.

"I want to tell you," she said, "Honoria—it was—it was me."

"Yes, dear, I know," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Jealous," said Chaddy. "I wanted—"

"I know," said Miss Bulstrode.

Tears rolled very slowly down Miss Chadwick's cheeks. "It's so awful . . . I didn't mean—I don't know how I came to do such a thing!"

"Don't think about it any more," said Miss Bulstrode.

"But I can't—you'll never—I'll never forgive myself—"

Miss Bulstrode held the hand a little more tightly in hers.

"Listen, dear," she said. "You saved my life, you know. My life and the life of that nice woman, Mrs. Upjohn. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

"I only wish," said Miss Chadwick, "I could have given *my* life for you both. That would have made it all right . . ."

Miss Bulstrode looked at her with great pity. Miss Chadwick took a great breath, smiled, then, moving her head very slightly to one side, she died.

"You *did* give your life, my dear," said Miss Bulstrode softly. "I hope you realize that—now."

CHAPTER XXV

LEGACY

"A MR. ROBINSON has called to see you, sir."

"Ah!" said Hercule Poirot. He stretched out his hand and picked up a letter from the desk in front of him. He looked down on it thoughtfully.

He said: "Show him in, Georges."

The letter was only a few lines:

> *Dear Poirot,*
>
> *A Mr. Robinson may call upon you in the near future. You may already know something about him. Quite a prominent figure in certain circles. There is a demand for such men in our modern world. I believe, if I may so put it, that he is, in this particular matter, on the side of the angels. This is just a recommendation, if you should be in doubt. Of course, and I underline this, we have no idea as to the matter on which he wishes to consult you.*
>
> *Ha ha! and likewise ho ho!*
>
> *Yours ever,*
> *Ephraim Pikeaway*

Poirot laid down the letter and rose as Mr. Robinson came into the room. He bowed, shook hands, indicated a chair.

Mr. Robinson sat, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his large yellow face. He observed that it was a warm day.

"You have not, I hope, walked here in this heat?"

Poirot looked horrified at the idea. By a natural association of ideas, his fingers went to his moustaches. He was reassured. There was no limpness.

Mr. Robinson looked equally horrified.

"No, no, indeed. I came in my Rolls. But these traffic blocks. One sits for half an hour sometimes."

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

There was a pause—the pause that ensues on part one of a conversation before entering upon part two.

"I was interested to hear—of course one hears so many things—most of them quite untrue—that you had been concerning yourself with the affairs of a girls' school."

"Ah," said Poirot. "That!"

He leaned back in his chair.

"Meadowbank," said Mr. Robinson thoughtfully. "Quite one of the premier schools of England."

"It is a fine school."

"Is? Or was?"

"I hope the former."

"I hope so, too," said Mr. Robinson. "I fear it may be touch and go. Ah well, one must do what one can. A little financial backing to tide over a certain inevitable period of depression. A few carefully chosen new pupils. I am not without influence in European circles."

"I, too, have applied persuasion in certain quarters. If, as you say, we can tide things over. Mercifully, memories are short."

"That is what one hopes. But one must admit that events have taken place there that might well shake the nerves of fond mammas—and papas also. The games mistress, the French mistress, and yet another mistress—all murdered."

"As you say."

"I hear," said Mr. Robinson, "one hears so many things, that the unfortunate young woman responsible has suffered from a phobia about schoolmistresses since her youth. An unhappy childhood at school. Psychiatrists will make a good deal of this. They will try at least for a verdict of diminished responsibility, as they call it nowadays."

"That line would seem to be the best choice," said Poirot. "You will pardon me for saying that I hope it will not succeed."

"I agree with you entirely. A most cold-blooded killer. But they will make much of her excellent character, her work as secretary to various well-known people, her war record—quite distinguished, I believe—counterespionage . . ."

He let the last words out with a certain significance—a hint of a question in his voice.

"She was very good, I believe," he said more briskly. "So young—but quite brilliant, of great use—to both sides. That was her métier—she should have stuck to it. But I can understand the temptation—to play a lone hand, and gain a big prize." He added softly, "A very big prize."

Poirot nodded.

Mr. Robinson leaned forward.

"Where are they, M. Poirot?"

"I think you know where they are."

"Well, frankly, yes. Banks are such useful institutions, are they not?"

Poirot smiled.

"We needn't beat about the bush really, need we, my dear fellow? What are you going to do about them?"

"I have been waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Shall we say—for suggestions?"

"Yes—I see."

"You understand they do not belong to me. I would like to hand them over to the person they do belong to. But that, if I appraise the position correctly, is not so simple."

"Governments are in such a difficult position," said Mr. Robinson. "Vulnerable, so to speak. What with oil, and steel, and uranium, and cobalt and all the rest of it, foreign relations are a matter of the utmost delicacy. The great thing is to be able to say that Her Majesty's Government has absolutely no information on the subject."

"But I cannot keep this important deposit at my bank indefinitely."

"Exactly. That is why I have come to propose that you should hand it over to me."

"Ah," said Poirot. "Why?"

"I can give you some excellent reasons. These jewels—mercifully we are not official, we can call things by their right names—were unquestionably the personal property of the late Prince Ali Yusuf."

"I understand that is so."

"His Highness handed them over to Squadron Leader Robert Rawlinson with certain instructions. They were to be got out of Ramat, and they were to be delivered to *me.*"

"Have you proof of that?"

"Certainly."

Mr. Robinson drew a long envelope from his pocket. Out of it he took several papers. He laid them before Poirot on the desk.

Poirot bent over them and studied them carefully.

"It seems to be as you say."

"Well, then?"

"Do you mind if I ask a question?"

"Not at all."

"What do you, personally, get out of this?"

Mr. Robinson looked surprised.

"My dear fellow. Money, of course. Quite a lot of money."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

"It is a very old trade," said Mr. Robinson. "And a lucrative one. There are quite a lot of us, a network all over the globe. We are, how shall I put it, the arrangers behind the scenes. For kings, for presidents, for politicians, for all those, in fact, upon whom the fierce light beats, as a poet has put it. We work in with one another, and remember this: we keep faith. Our profits are large but we are honest. Our services are costly—but we do render service."

"I see," said Poirot. "*Eh bien!* I agree to what you ask."

"I can assure you that that decision will please everyone." Mr. Robinson's eyes just rested for a moment on Colonel Pikeaway's letter where it lay at Poirot's right hand.

"But just one little moment. I am human. I have curiosity. What are you going to do with these jewels?"

Mr. Robinson looked at him. Then his large yellow face creased into a smile. He leaned forward.

"I shall tell you."

He told him.

ii

Children were playing up and down the street. Their raucous cries filled the air. Mr. Robinson, alighting ponderously from his Rolls, was cannoned into by one of them.

Mr. Robinson put the child aside with a not unkindly hand and peered up at the number of the house.

No. 15. This was right. He pushed open the gate and went up the three steps to the front door. Neat white curtains at the windows, he noted, and a well polished brass knocker. An insignificant little house in an insignificant street in an insignificant part of London, but it was well kept. It had self-respect.

The door opened. A girl of about twenty-five, pleasant looking, with a kind of fair, chocolate-box prettiness, welcomed him with a smile.

"Mr. Robinson? Come in."

She took him into the small sitting room. A television set, cretonnes of a Jacobean pattern, a cottage piano against the wall. She had on a dark skirt and a grey pullover.

"You'll have some tea? I've got the kettle on."

"Thank you, but no. I never drink tea. And I can only stay a short time. I have only come to bring you what I wrote to you about."

"From Ali?"

"Yes."

"There isn't—there couldn't be—any hope? I mean—it's really true—that he was killed? There couldn't be any mistake?"

"I'm afraid there was no mistake," said Mr. Robinson gently.

"No—no, I suppose not. Anyway, I never expected . . . When he went back there I didn't think really I'd ever see him again. I don't mean I thought he was going to be killed or that there would be a revolution. I just mean—well, you know—he'd have to carry on, do his stuff—what was expected of him. Marry one of his own people—all that."

Mr. Robinson drew out a package and laid it down on the table.

"Open it, please."

Her fingers fumbled a little as she tore the wrappings off and then unfolded the final covering . . .

She drew her breath in sharply.

Red, blue, green, white, all sparkling with fire, with life, turning the dim little room into Aladdin's cave.

Mr. Robinson watched her. He had seen so many women look at jewels.

She said at last in a breathless voice:

"Are they—they can't be—*real?*"

"They are real."

"But they must be worth—they must be worth . . ."

Her imagination failed.

Mr. Robinson nodded.

"If you wish to dispose of them, you can probably get at least half a million pounds for them."

"No—no, it's not possible."

Suddenly she scooped them up in her hands and rewrapped them with shaking fingers.

"I'm scared," she said. "They frighten me. What am I to do with them?"

The door burst open. A small boy rushed in.

"Mum, I got a smashing tank off Billy. He—"

He stopped, staring at Mr. Robinson.

An olive-skinned, dark-eyed boy.

His mother said:

"Go in the kitchen, Allen, your tea's all ready. Milk and biscuits and there's a bit of gingerbread."

"Oh, good." He departed noisily.

"You call him Allen?" said Mr. Robinson.

She flushed.

"It was the nearest name to Ali. I couldn't call him Ali—too difficult for him and the neighbours and all."

She went on, her face clouding over again.

"What am I to do?"

"First, have you got your marriage certificate? I have to be sure you're the person you say you are."

She stared a moment, then went over to a small desk. From one of the drawers she brought out an envelope, extracted a paper from it and brought it to him.

"Him . . . yes . . . Registrar of Edmondstow . . . Ali Yusuf, student . . . Alice Calder, spinster. Yes, all in order."

"Oh, it's legal all right—as far as it goes. And no one ever tumbled to who he was. There's so many of these foreign Moslem students, you see. We knew it didn't mean anything really. He was a Moslem and he could have more than one wife, and he knew he'd have to go back and do just that. We talked about it. But Allen was on the way, you see, and he said this would make it all right for him—we were married all right in this country and Allen would be legitimate. It was the best he could do for me. He really did love me, you know. He really did."

"Yes," said Mr. Robinson. "I am sure he did."

He went on briskly,

"Now, supposing that you put yourself in my hands. I will see to the selling of these stones. And I will give you the address of a lawyer, a really good and reliable solicitor. He will advise you, I expect, to put most of the money in a trust fund. And there will be other things, education for your son, and a new way of life for you. You'll want social education and guidance. You're going to be a very rich woman and all the sharks and the confidence tricksters and the rest of them will be after you. Your life's not going to be easy except in the purely material sense. Rich people don't have an easy time in life, I can tell you—I've seen too many of them to have that illusion. But you've got character. I think you'll come through. And that boy of yours may be a happier man than his father ever was."

He paused. "You agree?"

"Yes. Take them." She pushed them toward him, then said suddenly: "That schoolgirl—the one who found them—I'd like her to have one of them—which—what colour do you think she'd like?"

Mr. Robinson reflected. "An emerald, I think—green for mystery. A good idea of yours. She will find that very thrilling."

He rose to his feet.

"I shall charge you for my services, you know," said Mr. Robinson. "And my charges are pretty high. But I shan't cheat you."

She gave him a level glance.

"No, I don't think you will. And I need someone who knows about business, because I don't."

"You seem a very sensible woman if I may say so. Now then, I'm to take these? You don't want to keep—just one—say?"

He watched her with curiosity, the sudden flicker of excitement, the hungry covetous eyes—and then the flicker died.

"No," said Alice. "I won't keep—even one." She flushed. "Oh, I daresay that seems daft to you—not to keep just one big ruby or an emerald—just as a keepsake. But you see, he and I—he was a Moslem but he let me read bits now and again out of the Bible. And we read that bit—about a woman whose price was above rubies. And so—I won't have any jewels. I'd rather not."

"A most unusual woman," said Mr. Robinson to himself as he walked down the path and into his waiting Rolls.

He repeated to himself.

"A most unusual woman."

HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE
CITY OF LAS VEGAS
900 S. BRUSH STREET
LAS VEGAS, NV 89107

HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE
CITY OF LAS VEGAS
900 S. BRUSH STREET
LAS VEGAS, NV 89107